

## You gave me your sweater. by mayfixlds, okwillthewise

**Series:** [He's got you mesmerised \[2\]](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** (kinda), 1987, 1988, Angst, BAMF Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Bisexual Mike Wheeler, Boys In Love, Coming Out, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Established Relationship, F/M, Flashbacks, Fluff, Friends to Lovers, Gay Will Byers, Hopper Lives, Implied/Referenced Homophobia, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Mike Wheeler Loves Will Byers, Past Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Period-Typical Homophobia, Romance, Siblings Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers Has Powers, Will Byers Loves Mike Wheeler, post stranger things 3, sequel time

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Holly Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Male Character(s), Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Minor Mike/El mentions, They're flashbacks, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2020-12-10

**Updated:** 2021-06-28

**Packaged:** 2022-03-31 13:36:19

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 11

**Words:** 100,999

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

"If she ruined it I don't know what I'd do. I couldn't have that, I can't have that because I am so in love with you-"

Or, two boys navigating their way through life and love.



## **1. In your hand, the birth of a new day**

### **Author's Note:**

Hello! We were so blown away by the love 'It's just polyester' was given, that we knew we couldn't stop writing about these dumb boys anytime soon, so HERE'S A SEQUEL! Though this could ~ technically ~ be read alone, we would recommend hopping over to part one first, as it WILL add a lot more context. We hope you all enjoy :)

**Update:** Our story is now being written as a full sequel! We're excited, we hope you are too. If you've been here since we first posted this, we hope you'll stick with us for the plot. Thank you so much for reading :)

### **Valentine's Day, 1987. Hawkins, Indiana.**

If Mike had been asked this time last year how he'd be spending Valentine's day of 1987, he most likely would've said in Benton with El. Now, following the events of New Year's Eve 1986, he could safely say that the reality of the situation was nothing like how he could've imagined.

Instead, here he was, in the kitchen with his mom and little sister, wearing a floral apron, attempting to make heart-shaped cookies and missing his boyfriend.

Mike, if he were being honest, had planned to spend his Saturday moping until Will was able to call him, but Holly had woken him up ridiculously early with the great idea of baking cookies. She'd been talking about Valentine's Day non stop since she'd proudly arrived home from school yesterday brandishing many, *many* homemade cards with various valentines related designs on them (*"I really like*

*the one that says this” she’d proclaimed pointing at a card that had ‘You Won My Heart’ with a completed naughts and crosses board on the front).*

*What seven year old needs a Valentine?*

“Mike, I understand how frustrating it must be for you, especially as Jane broke up with you just before the day” *Two months before but sure mom* “But you’re 16. You’ve got the rest of your life for Valentine’s Days” His mom had said as Holly passed him a wooden spoon, indicating for him to mix the mixture in the bowl in front of him, as he does so the doorbell rings. They’re not expecting anyone, so they shrug it off as a door to door salesman and ignore it.

“I’m not *frustrated* . I just don’t want to be here”

“Well, do you have somewhere *better* to be?”

*With Will.*

*I want to be with Will.*

“Apparently not” his words are laced with sarcasm “I guess I’m stuck here”

“*Michael*, you’ll upset your sister. She’s been wanting to do this-”

“Since *yesterday*. I don’t think this has been something she’s been planning exactly. She’ll forget we even did it next week”

The doorbell rings for a second time, followed by a few knocks, and Mike takes this as his moment, telling his mom and sister “*We should probably see who that is - you stay with Holly so she doesn’t burn herself and I’ll get it*” and feels relieved when they *finally* let him escape. He rushes to the door, hoping whoever is on the other side is there to rescue him. He can see a blurry but familiar yellow hat through the frosted glass and he swings open the door.

“Heya buddy, looking sharp,” Dustin greets, pointing at the apron his mom had made him wear to avoid getting cookie mixture on his sweater.

“Dustin, what are you *doing* here? It’s *early* ”

“I’ve come to cheer you up-”

“Why would I need cheering up? Why would I need cheering up *this* early”

“Ok, for starters, it’s *11am* . Not early Michael” Mike frowns, “And second, I know how much you wanted to spend the day with-”

“Keep it *down*” he shushes “ My mom is in the kitchen with Holly-”

“But, it looks like you’ll just have to settle for me huh?”

And that’s how Mike found himself in the basement with Dustin, playing *Gremlins* on his *Atari* with a few of Holly’s heart-shaped cookies. It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate Dustin visiting, of course not- it had saved him from further baking with his mom and sister-though Dustin had volunteered himself to *lend a helping hand* before Mike had swiftly made up an excuse that they simply had too much homework and didn’t have the time.

“Mike you never mentioned you had homework before”

“I forgot. Just swept up for all the Valentines Festivities” His mom gave him a pointed look before shoo-ing him away from the kitchen.

It’s quiet in the basement for a little while, the only sounds being Dustin’s occasional outbursts about the difficulty spike and how the game was a ‘*C heap Space Invaders rip off*’ It’s when he gets *GAME OVER* for the 5th time, that Mike finally speaks.

“Why are you here again?”

“Because we all knew you’d be like this”

“We being...”

“Max, Lucas and I”

“Great.” He sighs “Look, thanks for coming but i’m *fine*. I’m babysitting Holly later as well so plenty more cookies to make”

“But *now* you’re spending time with me, who also wants to spend time with you and frankly, you’re going to have to get over yourself, stop being all *Mike* and suck it up”

*Well doesn’t that sound all the more appealing now* he thinks. He rolls his eyes

“Way to kick a guy when he’s down”

“Just try not to think about not getting to see him today - you’ll get to next month. For a whole *week*. Valentine’s Day is just another day, really” Dustin tries to reassure him "No matter what *Hallmark* tries to tell us"

“I know. I just-” he sighs “I really miss him”

Dustin grins, giving him a look that Mike was starting to notice his friends shared whenever he mentioned Will.

“Ok, what is that?”

“What’s what?”

“That. That *face*. It’s annoying. Will’s my *boyfriend*” He lowers his voice, looking up at the basement door to make sure it was shut, “I know he’s my boyfriend, you all know he’s my boyfriend. You don’t have to all keep doing *that*”

“But it’s *cute*”

“ *Cute?* ”

“How you are with Will. You’re like a whole other person. You’re different than when you were with El”

Mike rolls his eyes

“It’s been two months, Dustin”

Dustin smiles, grabbing another one of Holly's cookies and taking a bite.

“Exactly. If this is how you are after two months, expect a hell of a lot more of us doing *that*”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t.”

“Well we’d appreciate it if you just admit that it *is* different and you *loooooove* him” he teases, gently nudging him

“It was an *emotional* moment”

“Yeah that resulted in you confessing how much you like him on a swing, giving him your sweater and then you two making eyes at each other the *whole of New Years*”

“He was already wearing the sweater” Mike mumbles, “I just forgot to take it back.”

“*Conveniently* forgot to take it back, you mean”

Mike pushes him, though there’s no malice and a smile is evident on his face.

“Have you told him yet?” Dustin asks, more serious this time

“Told him what? That I want my sweater back? Because he *does* look good in it-”

“Oh shut up” Dustin nudges him “I *meant*, have you told him you love him”

Mike thinks back to all the moments over the past month and a bit that he had *almost* let it slip to Will. There had been plenty of phone calls, there had been the weekend that they'd spent together in Hawkins, but nothing had ever felt quite *right*. This was still all so new, *so fragile*, and even though he'd never been surer of anything in his life, he didn't want to ruin it by diving in too fast.

"No" Mike reluctantly shakes his head "I don't want to scare him off."

Dustin gives him a look that Mike can only understand as *don't be stupid*.

"It's *Will*. He's just as gone on you as you are on him"

"I just-it's only been two months. I don't want to seem as though I'm coming on too strong. But I do. Love him. I have for a while I think. And today sucks because the only thing I really want to do is be with him and I hate that I can't"

"I could cover for you, if you wanted to go?"

Mike shakes his head "I couldn't even if I wanted to. Hopper has an appointment out of state. Mrs Byers didn't want to leave El and Will alone, especially since Jonathan is who knows where, doing who knows what with Nancy right now, which to be honest I'm trying not to think about. They're just so-*ugh*"

Dustin barks out a laugh

"You're a hypocrite you know."

"*Excuse me?*"

"You're a *hypocrite*. You talk about Jonathan and Nancy but when you and Will are in the same room you can't take your eyes off of him" Dustin retorts, rolling his eyes

"That's not *true*. In case you haven't noticed, we don't exactly have



many opportunities to even be together.”

“Emphasis on the *when you’re in the same room*”

“Well, even then it’s a *little* different, Dustin”

“Not really.”

“What happened to us being *cute* ?”

“You are” Dustin agrees “But you’re also a hypocrite”

“You’re just jealous” Mike scoffs at him, swiping the last cookie

“Don’t flatter yourself, Mike. You’re not exactly my type” he sighs “I can’t believe Suzie broke up with me. She really was hotter than-”

“Phoebe Cates” Mike rolls his eyes “I know” he pauses again, shrugging “She’s alright, I guess. She’s no Wi-”

“Dude, shut up” Dustin promptly picks up a cushion from next to him on the couch, swinging it at Mike.

“Hey, you’re the one who decided to come keep me company. You have to deal with me talking about Will”

“I’m regretting my decision already” Dustin retorts, but he smiles

“Thanks though -” Mike adds, smiling back “For coming over, I mean. Sorry I haven’t been the best company on Valentines”

“You’ve been the most fabulous date, Michael”

Mike laughs, pushing Dustin as he does so.

“Know what would make it even better? Beating you at *Gremlins*”

“You’re on”

---

The phone rings at exactly 7:30pm that evening, and Mike practically sprints to answer it. His parents are on a date and with Nancy out of the picture, it fell on Mike to babysit Holly. She'd fallen asleep about half an hour ago, and Mike wanted to keep it that way- though after the amount of cookies he'd allowed his sister to consume, he wasn't sure how.

*We'll deal with the fallout tomorrow. Hopefully mom is in too good a mood after her date night with dad for the first time in months.*

If Mike was honest, he never wanted to play *Uno* again, after way too many games this evening, both with Dustin and Holly. He'd hoped the game would stop when Dustin had left but evidently, Holly enjoyed it a bit more than Mike anticipated. It wasn't that he minded looking after his sister, not really, it was more than that this *really* wasn't how he wanted to be spending his Valentine's Day. He gets to the phone on the fourth ring, a little out of breath.

"Hi"

*"Hi"*

Mike can almost hear the smile in Will's voice

"How was Hopper's appointment?" Mike asks

"Good. Owens' thinks he can be discharged next time" Will tells him  
"Mom is happy. I don't think she's fully been able to relax whilst he's still been having these appointments"

"I bet El is happy, too"

“Yeah” Will agrees. “She hasn’t left him alone since we got back in the car. Made him sit in the back with her. He didn’t argue too much, I think he wants to make sure she’s real as much as she’s checking he is”

Mike smiles at the thought

“I’m glad it was a good day”

“Yeah, I think it’s the good news we deserve you know? After everything.”

Mike hums in response before Will speaks again

“What did *you* do today?”

“Nothing really, made cookies, ate cookies, realised I hate the game *Uno*. Dustin came over though”

“Dustin?”

“Seems that everyone collectively decided that i’d be acting, in Dustin’s words, all *Mike* today”

“Kind of sounds like you were though”

“Not the point Byers.” a beat “I miss you, though”

“I miss you, too”

“Our first Valentine’s day and I didn’t get to spend it with you. It sucks”

“It *really* sucks. It’s my first Valentine’s day *ever* , and I hate that I didn’t get to see you”

Mike hadn’t considered that. He’d had two Valentine’s with El, and he’d remembered the significance of that first one. It had been amazing getting to spend the day together - even with Hopper grumbling from the living room the whole time - and he found

himself unnecessarily angry at the world for splitting himself and Will up. If Will had still been in Hawkins, they would've had the whole day together, and he wouldn't have spent it hauled up in his basement with Dustin and playing *Uno* with his baby sister.

He knows that next year they can make sure they're together and he knows that realistically it is just a day, but when he lets himself think about it, even though he'd already had those two Valentine's with El, this one with Will felt *different* somehow. He *had* loved El, and he'd enjoyed the time they'd spent together but nothing had ever felt like this.

"It's not too late to catch the Greyhound. I'll meet you at the station"

Will laughs

"I wish but I probably should spend some time with dad" He pauses  
"Unless...you want to come here and spend some quality time with Hopper as well?"

"You know, somehow I think I'd like to avoid another Hopper interrogation. Don't think me arriving in Benton because I'm now dating his *son* would be the best way to acclimatise him back into the real world"

Will laughs "Probably not. I doubt it would be easy for you to try to explain to your mom why you needed to be with *me* on Valentine's day, either"

Mike rolls his eyes, forgetting for a moment that Will can't see him.

"Oh no, I'm sure she'd be fine with my desperate need to be with my *best friend* today"

"*Desperate need* ? Sounds like you *were* being *all Mike* today"

"Maybe" he sighs "I'm sure mom was wondering what that was all about"

There's a pause, he hears Will take a breath

"Mike-"

"I'm sorry, I know I said I'd tell her"

"No, no it's ok" Will reassures "Really. I don't mind that you haven't"

"I will do it, promise. Just- not now"

"Mike" Will's tone is soft "There's no rush. You tell her when you're ready, not a minute before"

" *Soon* ok? I'm just not sure- about her, not you. *That* part I'm sure of. I've never been surer of anything"

" *Smooth* "

"Hey, you're the one that chose to be with me. You get me as your boyfriend and the corny lines come with it"

"Didn't realise that was part of the package deal"

"Deal with it Byers"

A beat.

"Me too though. I've never been surer of anything"

" *Smooth* "

"Shut up" Will laughs

Mike can feel there's something unsaid, something that they both want to say *there would be nothing cornier then saying it on Valentine's Day after all* .

But they don't. Neither of them feel that they mind.

“You come here next month”

“I do”

“For a week”

“Yeah, a whole week”

“I’ve been thinking of things we can do. Things that we can say are *ours*. There’s a few places and-”

“Don’t tell me yet. Let’s figure it out together”

“Ok” Will agrees “Together”

Just the thought makes Mike feel *warm*. All the possibilities of what's to come running around his head. There's a moment of silence before Will speaks again and he knows he was thinking of all of it, too.

“I just- I can’t wait- to do all this with you. Not even just spring break but, the summers, the lights in Du Quoin, New Year's again. Sorry I know it sounds like I’m getting ahead of myself talking about something that’s almost a whole year away but-”

“Well, I'm rooting for us Will. I mean, I'd like to think we'll be an *us* for a very long time and I'm looking forward to it all too. I'm looking forward to *everything* with you”

There’s a soft laugh through the receiver, “I’m rooting for us too Mike”

“Happy Valentine’s day, Will”

“Happy Valentine’s day, Mike”

And Mike finds he's still smiling by the time his parents arrive home.

## 2. I found a reason to keep singin' and the reason dear is you

### Summary for the Chapter:

We are pretty good together, aren't we?

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello! Thank you for the feedback on chapter one, we loved seeing some familiar faces as well as some new ones! We hope you enjoy this chapter just as much.

You can find the playlist Will makes for Mike [here](#)

**February 14th 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

*“Happy Valentine’s day, Will”*

*“Happy Valentine’s day, Mike”*

It’s a little way past 8pm when Will finally hangs up the phone.

*Just a few more weeks*, he thinks to himself, *Just a few more weeks and then you’ll see him.*

He walks into the living room to find his mom sitting on the couch, cradling a coffee in her hands, a smile present on her face

“Mom?” She looks up at him, giving him a small wave, still holding onto the mug, “Where’s-?”

“He’s just grabbing a few spare blankets, he’ll be back in a second, join me?”



He nods, sitting next to her on the couch

“So, how is *Mike* ?” she asks, a playful tone to her voice.

“Oh, he’s good. Seems like he had a fun day with Dustin, Holly and *Uno*. ” he replies, mimicking the tone Mike had used on the phone when talking about the game. His mom laughs

“I’ll make sure we have the game in time for Spring Break”

“ *Please*” He chuckles, giving her a smile, though it feels somewhat bittersweet. His mom clearly notices, putting down her coffee and beckoning him closer. He scoots over on the couch, resting his head on her shoulder as she uses her left hand to gently play with his hair.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to spend the day with him today”

“No, it’s ok.” he sighs. It was frustrating, as he’d told Mike it was his *first* after all. But he understood. Today was important for them all- they could finally become a proper family. “We’ve got plenty of time for all of that. It’s nice to see you happy, Mom. I’m just glad this is all working out for you- for all of us”

“Thank you sweetie. I’m glad too” she leans across herself, affectionately pinching at his cheek

“Mom ” he laughs, pulling away a little before nestling himself back in place, “ *stop*”

There is a peaceful silence for a little while, his mom going back to slowly stroking his hair. He presses himself closer into her, taking comfort in the moment. It’s rare they get to have moments like this, now. Eventually she moves her hand out of his hair, reaching round his shoulders and settling her arm there.

“We’re going to watch a movie” she says, breaking the silence “If you want to join us?”

“No it’s ok, have some time just you two. I’ll hang out with El for a bit. Enjoy your *movie date* with dad”

“With *dad* huh?”

He sits up, turning to face his mom, a slight frown on his face

“I’ve noticed you’ve been calling Hop ‘ *dad*’ a lot recently”

Will shrugs “I’ve been doing it since New Year”

“No, it’s different. At first it seemed like it was more for El. Now it seems more for *you*”

*She’s not wrong*, he thinks. It was something he’d noticed himself. Though on occasion he’d slip between the two; *Hop* and *Dad*- Calling him dad was becoming easy, like he was never anything *but* his dad. He had settled into their lives so perfectly, that it felt like he had always been there. Will hadn’t quite realised how much that was the case until the first time he’d seen him again since they had found out he was alive.

“Is that ok? I know you told me I don’t have to call him anything I don’t feel comfortable with but it feels right after everything. I want to call him dad.”

His mom takes his hands in her own giving them a reassuring squeeze “Of *course* you can. Of course it’s ok”

“Good,” He smiles, looking away from his mom for a moment

*A family. A real family. Me, El and Jonathan. Mom and Dad.*

“Does Hop mind if I call him Dad? Has he said anything?”

“Not at bit” she tells him reassuringly “He asked me about it, but only to make sure it’s what *you* wanted” she lowers her voice, “In actual fact, I think he really likes that you call him it”

“Really?”

She hums in response, a smug smile on her face

“Well, he is my dad, as far as I’m concerned” Will tells her “He’s been more my dad these last few years than Lonnie ever was”

“So he’s ‘*Lonnie*’ now, huh?”

“Is that, ok?” he asks, frowning

His mom ruffles his hair again

“Absolutely fine. You don’t owe him *anything*”

“I used to want to make things ok between us. I used to try to look forward to seeing him, but after I went missing, knowing he didn’t even *call back* after you told him I was alive, I don’t want to waste my time with him. Hopper was the one who helped find me, he was the one at all my hospital appointments, he was the one who was there for me. For you. For all of us. That’s what dads do. Hopper is my dad”

“Wow, kid, way to pull on the heartstrings”

Will and his mom look up to see his dad standing in the doorway, holding the blankets. Will flushes a little, but his dad gives him a smile. Depositing the blankets on the couch, he says

“Come here, kid”

Will stands, confused but before he can say anything else, his dad pulls him into a tight hug

“Dad-I can’t breathe” he protests lightly, but he melts into the hold

“You know you’re my kid, right? All those things you just said, I think the same. You’ve been my kid the second I found you in that God awful place. That’s never going to change”

Will squeezes back harder “Thank you for everything” he says, voice muffled by his dad’s jumper. He thinks he hears though, as his dad’s grip tightens.

“Right” he says after a while, pulling away from Will finally “Are you joining us for the movie?”

“No” he tells him, smiling “I already told mom- I’ll leave you to have some time together. I’ll go and annoy El instead - what are brothers for?”

His parents laugh at his comment, his mom standing briefly to give him a quick kiss on his head “Goodnight, honey” she says

“Goodnight Mom” he replies “Night Dad” he adds, his dad now setting up the blankets on the couch

“Night kid” he says in reply, holding out a blanket to his mom as she sits back down “Give El a hug from me”

With one last ‘goodnight’ he makes his way to the living room door, and heads down the hallway to find his sister.

---

“That was cute,” El says as he walks into her room. Her door was open slightly so he gave a soft knock before letting himself in. She’s led on her bed, flipping through her Trigonometry textbook and taking notes.

“What was cute?” he asks as he sits down next to her. He points to the math problem she had scribbled on the page “Gross”

“You and dad” she replies “And I know, I’ve been stuck on this one for ages”

“Well he *is* my dad” Will tells her “Sorry, you’ve got to share now but it serves you right for spying on me”

El laughs, pushing him slightly “I suppose sharing isn’t so bad. I got two brothers *and* mom out of it, so I’m not exactly upset about the whole thing”

He smiles at her

“Do you need some help? With Trig, I mean?”

“*Please*” she answers “I feel like throwing my textbook out of the window. The only thing that’s stopping me is that I really don’t want another detention with Mrs. Rodriguez. Sitting through an extra hour with her is hell”

“We can do it together,” he reassures “But can we put on some music, first? It helps me focus”

“Sure” his sister agrees, but as he stands to put something on, she catches his arm

“Wanna practice?” she grins, nodding toward her stereo

“What do we tell mom and dad if it goes wrong?”

“Power outage? They’ve fell for it before”

“Ok” he agrees “But you’re telling them if it does”

“It was me last time-”

“El-”

“*Fine*” she rolls her eyes “You ready?”

He holds out his hand and she takes it, interlocking their fingers. They don’t always have to be touching, but during their *practicing* they’ve found out that the effects are stronger if they are. *At least for now* , Will thinks, as he can already feel them growing and evolving. He tries not to think too much about what that means, and tries to enjoy the fact that he doesn’t have to get out of bed to turn the light off anymore.

El closes her eyes and he follows, channeling their connection. It’s not long until he finds her in the void, and she squeezes his hand at the recognition. Once together in the void, they shift their attention to the stereo. This used to be something El could’ve done with the slightest movement, but now with her powers being so temperamental, it’s only with Will that they’re *somewhat* stable. One more squeeze and he hears the dial turn, and slowly Corey Hart starts to sound out through the speakers.

“It worked!” El says, letting go of his hand. They wait a moment to see if the music stops now the connection is broken, but it continues playing and they high five, letting out a “*victory!*” which causes them both to laugh.

They eventually (after possibly playing with the electrics a little more, though he’d never admit it to their parents) turn back to El’s math problem. She gets the hang of it after a little while, and it’s as Will throws down his pencil after completing the page, stretching that he hears

*Just a little more time is all we’re asking for...*

*Appropriate* , he thinks, *after the day I’ve had*. He always feels like he’s

asking for *more time* with Mike.

Thinking about his boyfriend, along with Corey singing about how he will *never surrender* , causes a memory to resurface

*"I know you don't normally give someone a gift if you're the one leaving soon but listen to it sometime. Maybe it'll change your rotten music taste"*

---

**September, 1985. Hawkins, Indiana.**

Autumn was finally making an appearance in Hawkins- the heat of the Summer now becoming more of a distant memory. It was breezy as Will made his way to the Wheeler's household, leaves falling around him as he cycled. It was a route he'd made hundreds of times, but he found that this time felt different. He took in everything around him, *The Palace Arcade* ("Come on, you're up on Dig Dug, let's take that top score back, huh?"), *Melvalds* ("Well I don't know who's been raising you but I'm going to get you some new crayons"), *The Hospital* ("We made a new friend. She stopped it. She saved us. But she's gone now" *"Her name's Eleven"* *"Like the number?"*) before finally turning onto the Maple Street cul de-sac, reaching Mike's house. He ditches his bike on the front lawn, making his way toward the door. Before he can knock however, it opens, revealing Mike, who is leaning (rather awkwardly, Will thinks) against the doorframe. He smiles at Will

"Hi" he says, suspiciously enthusiastic

"Hi?" Will retorts. Mike doesn't move "Are you going to let me in?"

"Oh, sorry" Mike moves out of the way, letting Will step into the home, "It's really great to see you" He signals to Will, to follow him down to the basement

"Yeah" Will replies, making his way down the stairs behind Mike. He frowns at the silence of the basement, and he looks around as he

reaches the bottom step. Mike immediately makes his own way to the TV, kneeling down beside it.

“Are the others coming?” Will asks, gesturing to the empty room.

“Later” Mike answers quickly, fiddling with his video collection, “I just thought we could hang out for a bit. Just us. Before they get here”

*He feels guilty* is Will’s first thought, and he hates it. But could he blame himself for thinking it? Sure in the mall they’d *hugged it out*—after all, there were bigger things to deal with than words spoken out of anger. But, since that day there had been *something* lingering, between all of them really and with no Mindflayer amalgamation to act as a terrifying distraction slowly it was bubbling more and more to the surface.

It didn’t help that Will could feel that Mike and Lucas seemed to be treading on eggshells around him, making *too much* of an effort to include him in *everything*. So Will found it of no coincidence that as soon as he started to say ‘no’ when asked to hang out *again and again and again*, Mike had concocted an elaborate plan to get them alone, without the rest of The Party, presumably to figure out what was going on.

*To stop him feeling guilty.*

He sighs and makes a move to sit on the couch, opposite where Mike was currently knelt on the floor.

“How’s El?” Mike asks after a short silence, still arranging the videos.

“You could just ask her yourself, nothing stopped you before”

Mike flinches

“Sorry that was a low blow. She’s doing as well as she can. All things considered”

He sees Mike nod, and Will cringes.

“So,” He begins, an attempt to alleviate the tension now evident in

the room, “Are we gonna watch a movie or are you just going to arrange them until everyone gets here?”

Mike deflates before turning to Will, remaining seated on the floor

“What’s going on Will?” *and there it is* “We’ve been asking you to hang out and you say no. We’ve gone to visit you and you’ve found an excuse as to why it can’t be for long-”

“Well with El-”

“Oh don’t even try it Will. El’s been with us more than you have since- since it all *happened* ”

“What do you want me to say? If this is your way of trying to make summer up to me then, i’m not going to lie Mike, this is a really weird way of going about it”

“So there’s something to make up then, huh?”

Will curses under his breath, sinking into the couch. He avoids eye contact with Mike but can feel him observing him and he wishes he would *stop*- feeling his face begin to flush with the attention. He rubs at his eyes in an attempt to mask his reaction-peaking through his fingers to catch Mike throwing his head back, slightly shaking his head.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Mike asks and Will stalls.

*No. No we’re not because I might say more than I want to. Especially to you*

“What is there to talk about apart from minor guilt that I called El stupid and now she’s practically my sister?”

“*Will*”

“ *Mike*” He replies, mimicking Mike’s tone.



He hears him sigh before he makes his way over to the couch and sits next to him, though Will notes at more of a distance than usual.

“I-” Mike tries, “Look I didn’t mean it how- I didn’t mean it to sound-”

“Like I don’t *like* girls? You can just say it Mike, everyone else does.”

“Will-”

“Just *say it* Mike.”

Mike hesitates before replying “Like you don’t *like* girls. I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t mean it to sound bad”

*Well it did. It really did.*

Will hoped that the rest of The Party were due to arrive at any time from this point on, Mike hadn’t exactly set a timescale for how long they were *hanging out* after all. All he currently knows is that he needs to get out, and whether that be out of the conversation or out of the room he wasn’t sure, but at this point Will found he was very close to admitting something he hadn’t truly admitted to himself, hadn’t allowed himself to embrace.

“Look *please* can we stop talking about it. I *don’t* want to talk about it” He finally looks at Mike, who’s frowning, but a look of concern plastered across his face.

“Will come on, don’t shut me out”

“I’m not shutting you out Mike, I just *don’t* want to talk about it. We could have talked about this before and we haven’t. Why now? I don’t get why now”

“Because I want to fix this- I *can’t* leave this”

“Then you shouldn’t have said what you said then. You shouldn’t

have said that I don't like girls. You shouldn't have used that against me. You're *just* like them"

Mike looks alert. *No. No no.*

"Used that against you?"

"No- I don't mean that- I just- I just mean that-"

And *there's* the reason he didn't want to talk about it.

He starts to panic and there's Mike, looking at him with a curious look- Will feels like he can see right through him. *He's wrong* . That's what he wants to tell him. He can tell him that but Will knows it would be a lie.

" *No*. It's not what you're thinking. I know what they say Mike- you know what they say but i'm *not*. *I promise*. "

" *Hey* "

And it stops, and Mike has grabbed onto both his wrists and is looking at him directly in the eyes and Will hates that his stomach leaps "You're ok, alright? Just breathe for a second ok? I've got you"

And he has and Will tries to remain steady. Mike is guiding him through it, just like he always had, just like he's promised they'd be *crazy together* .

"You're ok Will, and I *know*-"

*He knows?*

Will considers for a second what would happen if he did voice what had been lingering since the year prior. He didn't have to tell him *everything* of course. But what if he said something? The way Mike was right now, the way he was comforting, telling him he was *okay*. Would Mike be ok with this? Mike *could* be ok with this.

“I know you’re not *that* ”

Oh .

Oh ok.

“Really though, I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t mean it as if you were- you know. I’m sorry if it came across that way. It was just- It was the heat of the moment and- look I shouldn’t have been like that. I was a total *asshole*. The whole day. I’m just *sorry*” Mike looks down, letting go of Will’s wrists, wrapping his arms around himself. “I just *need* to fix this Will. *Please* let me *fix this*”

Will finds he doesn’t really know what to say frankly because, for multiple reasons, Mike wasn’t wrong. Yes, that whole day had *sucked* . That was a given. Will was more concerned because as much as he would have liked to believe Mike’s claim that he ‘ *didn’t mean it like that* ’ there *was* a part of him that couldn’t shake the fact that maybe he knew *exactly* what he was doing when he’d said them. Despite his reassurances, he knew that Mike would have had to have understood what other people said about him; what his dad used to say (what he probably still said, to some people) and what Troy meant when he made his *fairy* jokes. Neither had been particularly subtle. Mike had been present enough in both situations multiple times.

He looks over to the boy next to him, Will noting that he’s never looked smaller

*Well, he wanted to know what’s going on. May as well go with it.*

“It’s not- it’s not just about that day” he sighs

“I hated it for a while. El coming back. I wanted to hate her. So bad. But how could I? I felt so alone. I just wanted *one day* but you guys were just so wrapped up in being together the whole summer and it was like nothing else even mattered. Even when Dustin came back-

but then he didn't even want to play so, I dunno. Maybe I was being stupid.

"I guess, I just hated the fact that you were slipping away. All of you were slipping away and you were all getting girlfriends and- I dunno. None of you would need me anymore"

"Will of course I'd need you" *please don't say it like that* "Whether you remember it or not, I wasn't lying when I told you, when you were..." he trails off before taking a breath, scooting closer to Will on the couch and placing his hand over Will's own "Becoming your friend, it was the best thing I've ever done. I'm sorry about how I made you feel. I *won't* do it again"

"How are you and El?"

There's more context to this than he lets on, and he hopes that Mike won't catch on to that.

"I dunno. I don't really know what we are"

"Do you want there to be more again?"

"I thought you were tired of talking about girls and relationships?"

Mike raises an eyebrow before looking down at their hands- Mike's own still placed over the top of Will's. He murmurs a *sorry* before pulling his hand away, though if Mike's fingers gently linger on top of his hand as he pulls away, nudging Will's hand with his knuckles once separated, Will doesn't think about it.

"I don't know. I think so? I mean it's *El*, you know?"

*No. I really don't*

"Sure"

And that's the last they speak about the subject.

There's a silence again, though it's *slightly* more comfortable now. Mike is still closer to him on the couch which Will considers an improvement from earlier at least. Despite his earlier resistance to the talk, he can't help but think that, despite the obvious ploy to get them to talk about *their issues*, it was nice to air what he'd been thinking since that day- *he guessed* . They were, or at least will be, *fine*.

But still, sitting here, neither of them saying anything, it was a bit *weird*.

"I'm sorry that I woke you up dressed as a wizard"

Mike lets out a breathy laugh and Will feels relieved

"It was a cool campaign, I meant that- though weirdly similar to what went down with the mall and everything a few days later"

"Yeah, I'm trying not to think of the implications of that, considering I could still feel *Him* at the time"

"And can you still feel it? *Him* I mean"

"No."

It's not exactly a lie. He hadn't. But there was something strange, a feeling he couldn't quite pinpoint though, he could put it down to the fact that maybe El's powers were beginning to manifest again, even just a little, and he was the unfortunate target of that.

"Good. I hope you never do again. You don't deserve that. You didn't deserve anything that happened to you"

"I'll pass that over to *Him* on our next run in. I think he'll take that feedback very seriously."

Mike gently nudges him and Will nudges back

“Have you got the date yet?” Mike asks solemnly.

“October 5th. We’ll be missing a bit of school but it’s the only date the owners of the new house can do”

“So we’ve still got time?”

“We’ve still got time”

*A pause.*

“Want me to put on some music to tone down the *Mike and Will emotions tour*?”

“Yes please”

Mike laughs and makes his way to his tape player. He filters through his selection and Will can’t help but chuckle at the faces he pulls as he tries to choose what to play. He finally settled on something, opening the tape player and putting it in. The music begins playing and Will frowns

“*Corey Hart*? Really Mike?”

“What’s wrong with Corey Hart?”

“It’s not *real* music”

“Sorry *Jonathan* ”

Will rolls his eyes “You’re just jealous that no one taught you what *good* music is”

“Guess you’ll have to teach me”

*Huh?*

“Teach me Byers.”

“You’re going to need a bit longer than a month if you keep listening to *Corey Hart*”

*“Just a little more time is all we’re asking for...”* Mike responds in a sing song tone

“Stop.” He jokingly pushes him

“What, you don’t like it?” he asks, and he’s *laughing* but there is also a fleeting look that appears on his face that Will can’t quite decipher.

“Well, your singing is clearly just as good your music taste”

“But you *liked* it”

“So when are the others getting here?” Will quickly asks as Mike rolls his eyes, a smirk evident on his face

*This.*

This felt like Mike. *His* Mike. If Will was being honest, this felt more like the Mike he knew before the day Will had rolled a seven. Before the demogorgon got *him* . *This* is that boy on the swings.

*Of course* he liked it.

“Later. I meant it when I wanted it to be just us for a bit. Is that ok?”

Will smiles “That’s ok”

---

October, 1985. Hawkins, Indiana.

It's raining the day before they leave and despite his mom's insistence that it *isn't safe to ride in the rain*, Will found himself cycling to the Wheeler's house that afternoon. He'd asked El if she wanted to come along, but she'd decided to get started on helping his mom with the packing. There was still something between them, Will noticing more *strange* feelings when they looked at one another- and after careful consideration found himself relieved then he could say for sure he could separate those feelings with *those feelings* (yet another conversation he was very glad he didn't have to have with Mike Wheeler)

On reflection, biking across town wasn't the smartest idea, especially once he arrived at the Wheelers, greeted with a frowning Karen Wheeler who'd insisted that he put on one of Ted's sweaters before sending him off to the basement where Mike was laying on the couch.

"Why are you dressed like my dad?" Mike frowns, seeing Will walk down the stairs

"It's raining. Your mom made me wear it"

"She's so weird, why didn't she just give you one of mine?"

He shrugs "I dunno. Maybe it was just the first one she could find"

Mike murmurs *fair enough* before sitting up, making space for Will next to him on the couch.

"I can't stay for long. You know, with tomorrow"

"We ran out of time huh?"

"Looks like it" he pauses "Speaking of, I have something for you"  
Will reaches into the pocket on his pants, fingers curling around the



mixtape he'd made for Mike.

---

It had been something he'd been working on for a while, since their talk back in early September, but only recently been able to complete. His mom had questioned him about it a few times, mainly about why he was cooped up within his and Jonathan's room (they'd had to share after El had moved in) for hours and days on end. But Will had just told her he *had to get it done* and her questions stopped.

"Looking busy there buddy" Jonathan had said one afternoon, knocking on the door.

"Huh? Oh yeah, I'm working on something"

"Seems like it, the mess that's all over your desk"

Jonathan looks down, noticing the tape deck and a list of scribbled song titles.

"Who's the lucky person?"

*Lucky person?*

"Mike" Will mutters in response

Jonathan gives him a look

"No. It's *not*- I swear, he just wanted me to introduce him to some better music. Music that isn't *Corey Hart* and-"

"Hey, *hey* , you're ok" Jonathan puts a comforting hand on his shoulder, looking over him to see the track listing. "Good call with *The Clash* and *Bowie*"

“You think?”

“Uh huh” He comes round to the side of Will, running a finger down Will’s notebook where the words *potential tracks* were written in capitals at the top. He pauses on two tracks by *The Smiths* “What’s your theme, Will?”

“I dunno. Just, songs I like that I think he should listen to”

“Every mixtape has got to have a theme”

“Well, maybe this one doesn’t” he murmurs, hoping his brother will stop the questioning.

Of *course* it had a theme. It had a rather distinct theme if Will thought about the lyrics enough. It just so happened to be that theme very much aligned with songs he thought Mike would like.

*Coincidentally.*

He can feel Jonathan looking at him, and Will still avoids eye contact, sitting wide eyed, lightly pulling at the palm of his left hand with his right

“Hey, look at me a second” Jonathan tries softly, and Will hears him sigh when he doesn’t turn to face him “I’m just asking because both could work. Think about it, ok?” he says, tapping the page where the songs were

“Ok”

They’re quiet for a while as Will records a song to the cassette. It’s when he presses pause that he speaks again

“Jonathan?” He pauses before continuing, “Do you think he’ll like it?” and if his brother notices the genuine concern in his voice, he doesn’t comment.

“If he doesn’t then there’s really no hope for him when it comes to music”

---

But now, here he was, his hand in his pocket, a grasp on the tape and despite feeling completely prepared to give him the cassette on the way here, Will now felt *sick*.

*It's just a mixtape he thought you've made one for your friends before. This isn't any different.*

*But it is isn't it?*

*No. Stop.*

"Here." He pulls out the tape quickly, holding it out to Mike before he can talk himself out of it

"Will-"

"I know you don't normally give someone a gift if you're the one leaving soon but listen to it sometime. Maybe it'll change your rotten music taste" he says, thrusting the tape at Mike.

He finally takes the mixtape, turning it over in his hands, " *Will The Wise Says: Listen to Better Music?*"

"Can safely say there's *no* Corey Hart on there"

Mike chuckles, still looking down at the tape

"Should we put it on now-"

" *No!*" Will snaps "I just mean, not yet. It's for you. You listen to it on your own, you don't want me here. Would ruin the music experience"

"Right..." Mike answer slowly, looking from the mixtape to Will

"I- I put a lot into it. Track 4 is great, and Track 9. To be honest though, I think you'll like Track 2 and 3 and-"

"Will " Mike interrupts, taking hold of his hands, that Will hadn't noticed he was moving as he spoke "*Thank you* " he says, squeezing Will's left hand, before pulling his own away.

"You're welcome" Will replies softly, before giving Mike a smile "Just don't tell the rest of The Party, I didn't make one for everybody"  
Mike laughs.

*They're going to be fine.*

---

## **February 1987, Benton Illinois.**

"Will, are you ok?" El's voice brings him out of his thoughts  
"What? Yeah, just thinking" he reassures her "This song, it makes me think of Mike"

" *Gross*" she sticks her tongue out at him

"Very mature, El" he says "Mostly, I was thinking about how bad he is at singing it"

"Did he subject you to that, too?" she rolls her eyes

"Yeah" he laughs "I liked it, though"

El smiles at him. It's a knowing smile, and he finds himself trying to dodge her gaze.

"You are truly made for each other- if you can put up with *that* "

He gives his sister a look " *Sure*. Anyway, let's get to work on the next trig problem and stop talking about my love life"

And it's as El is reciting what the hypotenuse is for the next question that he thinks

*We are pretty good together, aren't we?*

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading! Follow us both on tumblr  
[@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)

### **3. I played for it baby, and gave you such a wonderful start**

#### **Summary for the Chapter:**

“He was a kid”

“Well now he's a kid with his tongue down our son's throat so forgive me if I don't love him”

#### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Happy New Year! We hope you enjoy chapter 3 (and the return of a familiar face). We got distracted writing chapters 11 and 12 for this fic, but we have returned with some cute family drama!

#### **Spring Break, 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

Ever since Hopper's penultimate hospital appointment with Owens, things had been pretty quiet - minus the unusually large quantity of lightbulbs she'd had to replace - in the Byers-Hopper household. So, when Joyce wakes up on the second day of Spring Break, to an empty bed, despite the smell of coffee drifting down the hallway, it immediately triggers a concern. The left side of the bed is cold, as if no one had slept in it the night before and she panics for a moment that everything that had happened the last few months had been one very long dream.

*Hopper wasn't alive, wasn't okay, wasn't right here with her and their little makeshift family.*

She tries to reason, the way the therapist she saw had taught her, and reassure herself that the likelihood was that Hop had a rare early

start and was in the kitchen making breakfast. As much as she tried to let the technique ground her, after a few moments she knows the only thing that's going to ease her anxiety is seeing him. Making sure that he's real.

She swings her legs over the side of the bed, sliding her feet into the grey slippers El had bought her for Christmas. She shuffles into the hallway, making her way toward the kitchen but just before she reaches the doorway she overhears Hop speak

"How about a day on the town with your old man?" he asks "We could get some ice cream? Maybe catch a movie?"

Joyce smiles

"I'd like that, Dad" their daughter replies

"Wheeler won't mind you ditchin' him for the day?"

"No" El sounds a little confused "Why would he? He'll be with Will"

"Perfect" Hop says "Why don't you go get ready? I'll finish my coffee and join you in the living room in a bit?"

El must've nodded because she suddenly appears in the hallway, and with a quick '*Good morning, Mom*' she heads to her bedroom

Joyce makes her way out into the kitchen to see Hop sat at the table.

"Good morning" she says, giving him a quick peck before heading for the coffee pot.

“Hey, you”

“You’re up early” she notes as she sits down at the table “I missed you this morning. Bed was cold”

“I’ll make sure to make it nice and warm later” he smirks

She hits him in the chest before taking a sip of coffee

“Couldn’t sleep” he admits after a while “I’ve been pent up since last night”

They’d gotten back from Chicago late last night after Hopper’s final appointment with Owens. He’d finally been discharged, and told that once he was ready he would be able to go back to his life before he’d been taken to Russia. The family had decided they’d stay in Benton, as the only place they’d want to move to would be back to Hawkins, and that would open a series of questions they wouldn’t be able to answer. Owens had provided Hop with a bunch of documents, new records, a new ID, fake references; everything he’d need to start over.

Hopper had been silent on the car ride home, and she knew that he needed all the time possible to process everything that had happened the last year and a half. The last few months had been so full of appointments and now he was discharged, it seemed as though everything had hit him all at once.

“Are you ok?” she frowns, reaching over to take his hand. He lets her slot their fingers together “You know you don’t have to keep all of this to yourself, right? We’re a family now. I’m here no matter what, I love you *no matter what*”

“I know” he squeezes her hand “Dunno how I got this damn lucky but I sure as hell ain’t gonna take it for granted”



*It's me that's the lucky one, she thinks*

Hopper stands from his chair, hand still linked with Joyce's and pulls her up with him. It takes her off guard and she wobbles slightly, letting him steady her. Once she's on her feet, he hooks his hand under her chin and leans down to kiss her softly. She arches onto her tiptoes, hooking her hands around his neck, falling into it.

Joyce loses track of how long they stay there for- Hop had always had a way of distracting her, but she welcomes it taking comfort in him. After he'd started to feel better and they'd gotten their relationship on track, he'd been making her feel like she was seventeen again.

She feels him smile into the kiss before he pulls away slightly

"What?" she laughs "Do I have something on my face?"

"Marry me"

"What?!"

"Marry me" he repeats

"All that caffeine and nicotine has finally gotten to your head" she deflects

"I'm serious. Marry me"

"You're serious?"

"Never been more sure of anything" he smiles at her again "Marry me. I got you a ring and everything but seeing as we're a good few hours from Enzo's, I couldn't take you out on a date to ask"

“Benton has restaurants, Hop”

“I feel like right here in our kitchen fits the bill. Marry me”

“I can’t believe we got engaged whilst I was wearing pyjamas that are six years old”

“You look as beautiful as always” he pauses “Wait. Engaged? Is that you saying yes?”

She shrugs

“Might as well make it official”

And the look he gives her is the happiest she’s seen him in a long time.

---

Hopper doesn’t mention anything to El when they leave the house later that morning. He and Joyce had decided that they’d have a family dinner ( “*and Wheeler?*” he’d grumbled to her “*Hop, he’s practically family. Mike’s included.*”) tonight and break the news to everyone at the same time. Despite the fact he’s supposed to be keeping it under wraps, he can’t stop goddamn *smiling*. If El notices his mood is a little more joyous compared to usual, she doesn’t comment on it.

They head to a little diner called *Star-Line* in the center of Benton for a late breakfast. It’s a hole in the wall type of place and it has approximately three customers - himself and El included - but El seems to rate it, so they grab a booth and open up the menus given to them by the waitress - *Bailey*, apparently

“They do nice waffles here” El says casually, after a short while, still looking at the menu

“Oh yeah? Well you can get them if you want, my treat”

She shakes her head, looking up at him “Not while you’re here. They don’t come *close* to the *Triple Decker Eggo Extravaganza*.” She gives a small smile, that he finds he can’t help but return. “Best to get the chocolate cake, Mike liked that. Or a milkshake instead. They say they’re the best”

*Pretty sure that’s just something they say to draw in customers kid, but sure.*

“How is Wheeler?” He asks once they’ve placed their order

“Ok I think? I only saw him for a little bit last night” she shrugs

“Are you two alright?” he frowns slightly, noting her attitude toward him had changed slightly

“Yeah. Everything is all good now”

He’s about to ask when everything wasn’t good but before he can speak, Bailey brings over their food and he has to give it to Wheeler - the chocolate cake is pretty good.

He’d pretty much forgotten about their conversation as they leave the diner. El had talked his ear off about school, and her friends and her extra curriculars. They get halfway down the street, El still talking - this time about how the mint chocolate milkshake truly was the best in Benton, when Hop hears a “*El?*” from behind them.

They both turn to see a tall, brown haired teenager waving at El from next to the diner. He’s stood with a girl with similar coloured hair, who is frowning at them.

“Boy from your class?” He mutters to El as the boy starts walking to

meet them, but he gets no answer as El walks to meet him halfway.

“Nick” she smiles. The boy ( *Nick, apparently*) smiles back before pulling her into a hug. She reciprocates eagerly, standing on her tiptoes to make up for the height difference.

They’re both grinning widely when they pull away

“It’s so good to see you” Nick says to her

“You too. Me and Will have been coming to the diner and we haven’t seen you”

“Yeah” he says, slightly awkward now, Hopper notices “This has been the first time since the breakup”

*Breakup?*

The way he says it seems so casual that Hopper realises that they must be pretty close for El to know the personal parts of his life and the diners that he frequents.

“But still,” He continues, “Guess I had to come back at some point right? I’m sure they’ve started to miss one of their *best* customers-unless *you’ve* replaced me now” He lightly nudges her shoulder and she grins.

“It is good to see you, I mean that. Will’s baking isn’t as good now” El replies, a teasing tone to her voice and he laughs, rolling his eyes.

“Really though, how is everyone? Bad baking aside of course” Nick asks, eyes flicking quickly to Hopper “Will’s told me little bits, but there’s only so much you can talk in art class before Miss Arye shuts it down”

“We’re good. Mom is good. Jonathan is good. Will and Mike are good. And, this is *my dad*”

El gestures to him, Hop raising his hand giving the boy a small wave.

He notices the way that El introduces him is done in such a way that Nick must know a little bit more than the average person on the street. He feels a deep confusion as to why this boy - who before today he'd never even *heard of*, let alone *met* - had been given a small insight into their lives.

"Will wasn't kidding with the *shared trauma* thing, huh?" he mutters, before looking at Hopper properly, holding out his hand "Nice to meet you, I'm Nick"

"Jim" Hop says, shaking his hand firmly, noting that Nick shook with the same pressure

"So you're *all* good, huh?" he asks, turning back to El

"You can just ask him, you know?" she replies "He misses you"

"It's just been hard, El. But I miss him, too. And you"

El reaches out to squeeze Nick's hand.

"I know. But you can still talk to *us*. *Both* of us"

He squeezes her hand back before dropping it.

"Thank you, El. I might take you up on that. We better go get our table now, though" Nick says "I've left my sister waiting too long. Say hi to your mom for me" He adds, smiling "And Will too, of course"

"Bye Nick" El says in reply giving him one more smile, before both teenagers turned back the way they were going and started to walk off.

Hopper follows El, walking in a steady stride next to her.

"Are you gonna tell me who that was, kid?" he asks *because he seemed to know my entire family*

"Nick" she states, looking at him as if he's an idiot

“Well yeah, I got that” he retorts “But *who is Nick?*”

“Oh” she replies “He’s Will’s ex-boyfriend”

*He’s Will’s ex what, now?*

“*Excuse me?*” he stops in the middle of the sidewalk

“It was a *stressful* Christmas”

“Mhm” he nods “A stressful Christmas?”

“A *very* stressful Christmas. But it all worked out in the end” she takes his hand, pulling him along again “Let’s go see that movie now. I want popcorn”

“El, you *just* had a milkshake. And half of my cake. You can't have any room for popcorn”

She gives him *the* look that only she can give

“There's always room for popcorn”

He shakes his head but smiles, trailing after his daughter.

---

They arrive home around 6pm after the movie had finished although Hopper couldn't have told you what it was they'd seen. El had chosen it, which didn't bode well for his attention span in the first place, but now he was completely fixated on the fact that his son was gay. And had apparently had a *boyfriend*. A boyfriend who had seemed like he knew so much about their lives, about their *shared trauma*, but yet no one had even thought to mention him. No one had told him such an important part of who his son is.

It's not that he minded. Of course he didn't. He'd met enough bigots

in his time to know that an attitude like that was filled with hate and ignorance and he wanted Will to know that he didn't feel the same way, but if Will hadn't mentioned it to him yet, he didn't want to be the one to bring it up. Maybe, he thought, Will didn't feel entirely comfortable with him knowing yet, and as ridiculous as Hopper thought that was - he was never going to do anything but accept his son for who he was - he did understand the reluctance that Will could be facing.

El bursts through the door before him, kicking off her shoes and hanging up her coat. She calls out for Joyce, who shouts back that she's in the kitchen and El skips off to find her.

Hopper follows and reaches the kitchen just in time to see Joyce kiss El on the top of her head

"Did you enjoy the movie? What did you see?"

*"Some Kind of Wonderful"* . It was good. Dustin would've liked this one"

"Did the guy end up with his best friend then?" Joyce smiles good-naturedly and El laughs. He doesn't get the reference and acknowledges that it's another piece of information about his family that he didn't understand. He finds that he's frustrated with not just the big things, but all the little things that he'd missed; that had been taken away from him in *that place* . He tries to focus on his surroundings, the way Owens had taught him, drawing him back into the present.

"Sure did" El tells her "Well, I'm going to go wash up before dinner" she continues, giving her parents a quick goodbye and heading off down the hallway. Before Hopper can greet Joyce properly, he hears a small knock against one of the bedroom doors and a *go away El* , from Will shortly after.

*What are they doing in there that they don't want El to interrupt?* He thinks *Probably Atari*. He'd told Joyce letting Will have a TV in his room was a bad idea. *Teenagers and their video games*.

"Did you enjoy the romance?" Joyce asks, smirking slightly as she stirs a pot of bolognese on the stove

"Didn't really pay much attention" he replies, making his way over to her and giving her a quick kiss "Had a lot on my mind"

"I've been distracted, too. All day" but she smiles as she says it "I've let the boys know we're having a special family dinner"

"What for?"

She stares at him, frowning "The engagement?" she asks slowly, stopping her stirring "Do you still want-"

He's an idiot

"Of course. Yes. Absolutely" he takes the hand that's not holding the spoon "I'm sorry- I've just had a lot on my mind"

"Want to talk about it?" she offers as she turns back to the stove

"About Will-"

But before he can finish, the oven timer rings out, making them both jump

"Jesus!" he lets out

"Sorry" Joyce says sheepishly "Dinner is served. Can we talk about this later? And speaking of Will, can you go and tell the kids that the food is ready?"

He nods in agreement, still a little dazed from both the day and the timer, before heading toward the hall. He knocks on Jonathan's door first, then El's, but once he reaches his youngest son's door, he receives no reply after the knock. He tries again with the same response, and assuming that they couldn't hear over the sound of the *Atari*, he reaches for the handle and swiftly opens the door.



It was safe to say that he wasn't *quite* expecting to see what he saw. His first thought is that what El had said was right - Will *did* like boys, but before he can properly process that, thinking of El brings him to the fact that not only was his son *attached* to another boy, said boy was his daughter's *boyfriend* .

He sees *red*.

"What" he spits out "the *hell* is going on here?"

The boys break apart suddenly, making them unsteady and Will falls from his position in Mike's lap. He straightens himself up, before looking back at Hopper.

"We were kissing?" Will responds nonchalantly, whilst *Wheeler* seemed to be struggling, looking everywhere but at Hopper himself.

*No shit, kid.*

"How *dare* you. Your mother did you not raise you to be this way"

"Hey! Don't talk to him like that you piece of shit!"

*I liked it better when you weren't speaking, Wheeler.*

He turns to Mike, glaring "Oh, I'm the piece of *shit* ? Ha! Don't make me laugh" looking back at Will, he asks "Did Wheeler talk you into this?"

“What? No, of course not!” Will replies and his tone sounds so certain, so sure, that it knocks Hopper a little “This hasn’t come out of nowhere, if anything *Mike* was the one who needed to catch up. Just ask Mom, she’s known about me since October” he then gestures between the two of them “and this since-”

“*Joyce* knows about this?!”

“Why wouldn’t she? Do you think we’d be here if she didn’t?!”

It looked like he was going to have to speed up the chat he and Joyce would be having later.

“Because it’s *wrong*, Will” he rants, exasperated “It’s absolutely disgusting. How could you even think this was okay? How could you do this to your sister?!”

“Wait. *What?*” Both boys say in unison

*Wait. What?*

*What was going on here?*

He notices that they share a look, faces full of confusion. He frowns at them and before he can say anything else, Will blurts

“El and Mike broke up. In December. They broke up early December. Mike and I got together at New Year”

He lets the words register in his head, and suddenly *everything* makes sense. Why he hadn’t heard El on the phone to Mike much, why Mike had been perfectly content to spend the day without El, why Will had taken weekend trips to Hawkins, the *stressful* Christmas that El had mentioned and the look on Mike’s face when he’d been told ‘*keep the door open three inches*’ when he’d gone in to say hello to El, and the - what Hop now knows was *smug* - look Mike had given him when he’d

walked into Will's straight after. He realises pretty quickly that it wasn't that Will didn't want to tell him, it was that Will thought he *knew*.

He rubs his hand over his eyes and sighs "*Oh Jesus*. That's pretty fast, kid" sighing again, he asks "Is El okay?"

Now he knew, he couldn't help but wonder how his daughter was feeling about it all. She seemed fine, and her and Will were closer than ever, but he can't imagine that watching her ex-boyfriend and her brother together was particularly easy.

It's Wheeler that replies this time "She's good. We all are, now. She realised my feelings before I did. Trust me when I say we've all had way too many long conversations about this whole situation. You can ask everyone if you don't believe me"

"Mike -" He starts, with *another* sigh

"I love him, okay?" Mike interrupts. There is a certainty to his tone that Hopper had never heard come out of his mouth before "And I don't care what you have to say about it, because it's not going to work. This is *it* this time, Hopper. I'm not messing around. I *really* love him"

Hopper decides that this conversation has become far too heavy for his liking and he wants to sit down. He makes his way over to Will's desk, pulling out the chair. He fluffs up the pillow ( *rainbow print* , he notes to himself) before setting it back down, and sitting himself on top of it. He feels awkward sat in the chair which is clearly too small for him. He thinks for a moment, ruminating over what he has just been told.

He turns back to Will "Are you happy, son?"

Will nods, a smile forming across his face

"With *him* ?" his eyes glancing at Mike, who frowned in return

"Very" Will confirms "I love him, too"

Mike looks down, and there is a soft look on his face, something

again that feels unfamiliar to *Wheeler*

“Right” He says, resigned “I understand, but this is still my house-”

“*Technically* it’s Joyce’s”

*Shut it, you smug son of a bitch*

“My house. So, there will be some ground rules. I know you’re both 16, but you will follow them and maybe, just maybe, I will allow you to continue to date my son.”

Mike gives a slight snicker in recognition. Hopper rolls his eyes.

“Okay,” he states, standing up from the desk chair “I was coming up here to tell you dinner was ready. You get five minutes to, um, finish up and then I want you out of this room and at that table, capeesh?” and with that, he heads toward the door, out of the bedroom and back toward the kitchen, calling out one last “Five minutes!” behind him.

He heads back to the kitchen to find Joyce plating up their dinner

“Did you get the kids?” She asks as she sprinkles some cheese on what he assumes is her plate

“Why didn’t you tell me our son was dating Wheeler?” He asks, ignoring her question. He watches as her eyebrows knit together and she turns to face him

“What?”

“Will. I found out today from El that he had an ex-boyfriend - Nick. We ran into him. And before I could even get my head around *that*, I walk into his bedroom to find him on top of Mike. Goddamn. Wheeler”

“Oh, how is Nick?”

“Are we just going to ignore what I’ve just seen?”

“Do you have a problem with this?” she frowns “Because if you do-”

“*Of course* I don’t have a problem with Will. I just don’t understand why no one told me”

“Look Hop,” she turns back to him, placing a reassuring hand on his arm “We genuinely thought you knew. After all the phone calls Will makes pretty much every night”

“Can’t believe we’re paying a ridiculously large phone bill because of Wheeler”

“He’s not *that* bad”

“I’m telling you Joyce, the kid is out to get me. First my daughter, now my son”

“He’s a good kid. You forget I’ve known him since he was *five*. He’s never been out to get anyone”

“He’s a smug-”

“He’s our son’s *boyfriend* and he treats him well. Will is happy, and Mike is who he wants to be with. Look, I was concerned at first, especially because of El, but she came to me before Mike had so much as mentioned he had feelings for Will and *she* was the one who told me she wanted to break up. She knew she didn’t love him anymore, and he didn’t love her either and I think they’re better for it- they’re best friends now. As for Mike and Will, they just make *sense*. I think they’re it for each other, Hop. Like it or not, that kid is in love with our boy”

*Well they did say as much*, he thinks. But he still can’t shake his worries

“They’re in *high school*, Joyce”

“They’re old enough to know how they feel”

Sometimes he couldn’t believe the confidence Joyce had in situations. Her attitude toward so much of her life - of their life - was one he wished he could emulate. Her drive to find Will, the magnets, the *heart-to-heart*. She had so much fight in her, so much *conviction* , it was hard not to get swept up in it. It was one of the things he loved about her the most.

“I still need to bleach my eyes” he grumbles after a moment

Joyce rolls her eyes, which he pointedly ignores.

“He seemed fine, by the way. Nick. He said to say hello to everyone and he even *shook my hand*. The least Wheeler has ever done was hit me”

“He’s was a *kid* ”

“Well now he’s a kid with his tongue down our son’s throat so forgive me if I don’t love him”

“Okay. Yes. I will definitely talk to Will. But don’t give him a hard time over it, Hop. I mean it”

He nods, but his grumbling continues as he helps set the table, and especially when Mike and Will conveniently forget his five minute rule.

---

If Will could choose one word and one word alone to describe dinner

that evening, there would be only one he could possibly pick: *awkward* .

Certainly not helped by the fact that he and Mike hadn't made his dad's *five more minutes* rule and arrived at the dinner table looking a little *disheveled* - The glare that Mike had received when they sat down speaking for itself and was certainly one that they wouldn't be forgetting any time soon.

Will couldn't have predicted that this is how his day would be going. He knew that he hadn't officially come out to his dad, but his sexuality and his relationship with Mike was such a normal thing in the house now, that he really had just assumed that he knew. He thought that his mom or El would've said something by now, but the look on his dad's face when he caught them wasn't an easy one to digest. Even though his dad had ultimately seemed ok, and his disapproval was more with what he was doing (and evidently who it was *with*) , rather than the fact that it was a boy he was doing it with, Will did feel worried that he wouldn't be accepted by him. He'd spent so long used to having his family and friends know, and being so cool about it, he wasn't sure what he would do if his dad wasn't.

"So" His mom starts "how was everyone's day?"

*Well, I had my first real kiss turned make out with my boyfriend and my dad walked in, but, apart from that.*

"We just *hung out* in Will's room" Mike replies, looking down at his plate, face flushing. Will feels his is doing the same

"Hung out? Is that what they're calling it these days?" He hears his dad grumble, twisting spaghetti onto his fork in a *slightly too aggressive* manner.

"Hop " he hears his mom warn. He looks at his dad to see him roll his eyes

“Dad and I saw Nick in town,” El adds, before turning to look at Will  
“He said to say hello. I said your cakes weren’t as good now”

“Wow, thanks for that El.” He frowns at his sister and she smirks in return “You *should* have told him to sit with us at lunch for once. He might have listened to you over me”

“He seemed like a *good* kid. Downright pleasant to talk to”

“Hop!”

“What?” His dad asks, holding up his hands in defence “I’m just saying”

Mike grumbles something next to him, mimicking his dad’s earlier action of *slightly too aggressively* twisting the spaghetti onto his fork and Will can’t help but think that maybe they’re too similar for their own good.

“What about you Jonathan?” his mom swiftly tries to change the subject

“I made a good start looking through college brochures for next year” Jonathan tells her, looking up from his plate

“Are you still looking at NYU?” their dad asks, receiving a nod in response

It felt strange thinking about Jonathan going away to college. He’d put it off for a few years, after everything that had gone on, but now he was in a position to think about applying for next year and it caused a heavy feeling in Will’s chest. El looks over to him, a curious look on her face before he shakes his head simply mouthing that he was ok.

*I know he can’t stay here forever. I know things have to change but I can’t imagine a life without Jonathan in it.*



He knows he'll be home for holidays, and they can visit, but knowing he wouldn't be there to talk to whenever he wants makes him feel a specific type of sadness he hadn't before.

"They'd be damned fools not to take you" their dad continues "And of course you'll have me to show you the ropes in NYC. I can show you some of my favourite spots in Brooklyn"

"I'd like that" Jonathan smiles

The conversation dies down a little after that, the only sounds really heard in the room was that of their cutlery scraping across their plates. It's only when his mom puts down her knife and fork, that she speaks again

"Well, your dad and I have some news" His mom says after a little while "Some good news" she finishes, smiling at them all as she takes his dad's hand.

Will wonders for a moment what their news could be. His dad had just been discharged from the hospital, but they knew about that last night so it wouldn't be that, and they'd all decided as a family that they wouldn't be moving again.

"Mom" Jonathan speaks up "You're not-you're not pregnant, are you?"

Well that hadn't even crossed Will's mind, and he looks to his mom frantically

"Are you?!" He asks her

"No. No" she reassures quickly "I am definitely not pregnant. Three kids is plenty" she laughs, his dad joining in with her.

*Well, that's a relief.*

“You don’t have to worry about that, son” their dad says to Jonathan  
“What your mom was trying to say is that I’ve asked her to marry me”

Oh.

Oh .

“And I said yes” their mom adds “In case that wasn’t clear”

There’s a beat before the table explodes with congratulations- them all taking a moment to process the news. Jonathan looks between their parents, smiling and telling their dad that he *“has to always promise to look after her”*. Will jumps up from his chair, with a choked *“Mom”* , before heading over toward her and pulling her into a tight hug. El starts chattering about how romantic it is and how she’s never been to a wedding before and *please* can she be a bridesmaid. Mike gives a smile and congratulations and Will thinks about all the times Mike had been there when Lonnie had been an asshole to them all, and how now, Mike seemed genuinely happy that was a thing of the past; that they’d formed this little family.

But throughout all the commotion, the hugs and the fact that wedding planning had already begun ( *“I think we’d look great in blue”* *“El, you and mom can’t wear the same colour”* *“Well, wedding rules are stupid”*) all Will can notice is that the smile on his mom’s face is one he hasn’t seen on her in a very very long time.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading! Follow us both on tumblr  
[@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)

## 4. When you open up your heart and the truth comes out

### Summary for the Chapter:

“So yes then” she smirks “So who’s the lucky guy, or girl. I don’t judge”

“A guy” he blurts quickly, then lowers his voice  
“Will. It’s Will”

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for the feedback on the last few chapters and we're so glad you seem to be enjoying it as much as we're enjoying writing it.

You may notice we've updated the A/N on chapter one- this story is now a full sequel of Polyester. We're really excited about the plot we have, it's going to be a *ride* So we really hope you enjoy it from here on out- stick with us, we'll get there.

Anyway, here's Chapter 4, we hope you like it :)

### Spring Break 1987- Benton, Illinois

*The dream was always the same, though where it happened often changed. Today, he was by the pumpkin fields back in Hawkins.*

*There was no-one else around, there never was, but instead there was an intensely anxious feeling, like something was about to happen. He scans the field for the off chance that there may be someone around, and tries to call out only to find he can't- no sound comes out.*

“...Will?”

*It's not so much what he can see, but what he can feel and he feels cold. That roller coaster feeling he'd tried to explain to everyone evermore present.*

*And once again, the world seems to flicker and he's back there again.*

*He finds himself falling to the floor, frozen. Almost like that feeling from that summer, but everywhere. He looks down at his hands to see black markings creeping up his arms*

*Spreading.*

*And it feels like it's suffocating him as he squints his eyes trying to break free before-*

*"Will!"*

Will sits up with a loud gasp, frantically checking his hands and arms, feeling at his face to make sure all was ok, that *he was ok*

*It was just a dream again. He thinks It's always just a dream, that's all it is.*

*"Will?"*

He sees Mike leaning up at him from the camp bed, a hand on his

arm, a concerned look on his face. Will looks around his room for a moment, regrounding himself before looking over to his side table, noting the time ( *4am. Again*) and then his table lamp, the bulb thoroughly smashed- *I think that's the 3rd bulb in the house this week.*

“Are you ok?”

Will looks back to Mike, still slightly dazed “Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Kind of hard to sleep when you have lights flashing in your eyes” Mike lets out a breathy laugh. “Really though, are you ok? What happened?”

“It was just a nightmare”

“A nightmare that involves you bursting a lightbulb?”

*Well it seems to be the trend in recent days.*

Will sighs, looking back to the lamp. He begins to get up to start to clear up the mess before Mike stops him, saying ‘*Don’t worry, I’ve got it*’ and leaving the room to get the dustpan and brush.

It’s quiet whilst he clears up the mess, not that there’s much to talk about at 4am, but Will can tell there’s something on Mike’s mind- certainly proven by the occasional glances he would give him as he sits in silence.

“Has this happened a lot?’ Mike finally speaks, as he tips the debris into the trash can under Will’s desk.

“No.” Will answers a little too quickly. It’s not *exactly* a lie. It hadn’t happened *a lot*. Just that it had been more frequent in the last few months. Mike, as Will expects is unconvinced, his eyebrows slightly furrowed. “Really Mike, it’s ok. *I’m ok* . Whenever I have a bad dream

this just happens sometimes”

“Does El know this *happens sometimes* ?” he asks, sitting next to Will on the bed.

“El doesn’t need to know *everything* Mike” He responds, more of a snap to his tone than he intends. He squints, rubbing at his eyes for a moment “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound so-”

“Hey, it’s fine”

“Really though, I’m ok. It’s just a nightmare and I *know* it’s just a nightmare but,” he trails off, looking back at Mike, concern still evident on his face, “Look it doesn’t matter. I’m fine. I promise.”

He rolls onto his side, curling him up, hugging at his pillow. If Will was being honest with himself, he was quite worried. At first the nightmares were simply *nightmares* - the content was the same, no less terrifying but that’s all they were. They never manifested into anything more, they weren’t as regular.

*And* didn't result in having to explain to his mom why he needed another new bulb for his lamp.

*I don't understand. Things have been fine. El and I have got it a lot more under control, she's a lot more under control so why-*

“Will, you’re shaking”

“Can we just try and get some sleep? You’ve only got a couple of days here left and I really don’t want to be tired the whole time”

“Ok”

Ok.

“Budge up then” There’s a shuffle of blankets as Will finds himself turning back, once again to face Mike.

“What?”

“I’m not just leaving you like that. Budge up” Mike ruffles the edge of the sheets, but Will doesn’t move. Mike pauses “Are you ok?”

*Am I?*

“Yeah, I just- I haven’t shared a bed with anyone before” he finally mumbles

Mike frowns at him

“Will, we used to share all the time as kids”

“No, I know. I just haven’t shared with anyone that I’m *dating* before”

“Oh. Well, me neither” he shrugs “We don’t *have* to-I didn’t-”

Will lifts the comforter, moving over slightly

“Get in”

“Are you sure-?”

“Well, we used to do it all the time as kids”

Mike rolls his eyes at him but climbs in without saying anything else.

The say nothing for a little while, both *very carefully* keeping a distance between the two of them



"I guess it is a bit different now, isn't it?" Mike asks once he's settled. Will can feel that Mike is tense next to him

"Just a little" Will agrees, but he reaches for Mike's hand, entangling their fingers "A good different, though"

"Yeah. A good different"

And Will finds he sleeps easier for the rest of the night.

---

The nightmare isn't mentioned again until Will is on his second coffee and fifth mouthful of cereal the next morning.

"How are you feeling?" Mike asks from next to him at the kitchen table. Will has noticed he's barely touched his Corn Flakes.

Will shrugs "Ok. The next day is always a bit weird but I feel alright"

"Are you sure? It seemed like a pretty bad one" Mike frowns at him

Will smiles at Mike, leaning over to squeeze his hand

"I'm sure. It helped having you next to me. That was the best night sleep I've gotten in a long time"

"Well, I am here for a few more days if it helps- if you wanted to, I mean. We *are* sharing a room anyway, we might as well."

The offer hangs in the air as Will thinks over what Mike has said. He *had* been a little unsure last night, but all of his worries were gone the second Mike had slipped under the comforter with him. Mike never pushed him, always wanting to know Will was sure, and even now the way he'd phrased his sentence allowed Will to say no without any question. But he'd never felt as safe as he did with Mike,

so his answer was pretty clear.

He nods at his boyfriend, grinning “Sure. Although, if we do it *every* night, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep alone again once you’ve gone home”

“ *Excuse me?*”

Their bubble *bursts* and they look towards the entrance to the kitchen to see his dad, arms crossed, red faced, with his mom standing just behind, head in her hands and shaking her head.

“Morning, Dad?” Will greets, raising an eyebrow at his father.

His dad says nothing and doesn’t move from his position in the entryway.

“Morning, honey” his mom greets instead, walking in front of his dad and smiling at Mike “Morning, Mike. Did you sleep well?”

Mike nods, giving no verbal response. Will can see his fingers tighten around the spoon.

His mom walks over to the coffee pot, and reaches up into the cupboard in search of a mug. She pulls out a blue spotted one and turns back to his dad, cupboard door still open

“Hop? Coffee?” she asks, gesturing to the mug

“What?” his dad’s voice is gruff “Oh. Yeah. Coffee”

His mom nods, reaching for another mug, this time a red one, and starts to pour the coffee. An awkward silence settles over the room and Will notices Mike fidgeting.

“Is something wrong?” he asks finally, looking over at his dad who *still* hasn’t moved from where he was standing.

Before anyone can reply, he hears the laughter of his brother and sister echoing from the hallway. It's only a few seconds after that they both appear in the entryway behind their dad, and Jonathan is quick to pick up on the atmosphere of the room

"Why does everyone look so serious?" he asks "Who died?"

"Your brother and Wheeler had a *fun* little sleepover last night" his dad finally speaks

Mike drops the spoon.

Wait. No.

No.

"Hop-" his mom starts, sitting down at the table, both mugs in hand.

"Dad you've got this completely *wrong* . I *didn't* - we didn't -"

"*Sure*" his dad replies, glaring at Mike

"I had a nightmare" Will tells him firmly "Mike was *helping* me"

"It's true" Mike speaks for the first time since Will's family had joined them "He really did have a nightmare-"

"Is *that* what they're calling it these days?" his dad mutters, rolling his eyes.

"*Ok*" his mom interjects "I think it might be a good idea if we have a little chat"

"Mom, we really don't need-"

"I could eat a late breakfast" Jonathan says, trying to defuse some of the tension "Come on El" he adds, grasping her elbow and trying to

steer her down the hallway

“But I’m hungry-”

“*El*”

“*Fine*” but she makes no move to follow her brother.

“*Actually* Honey, why don’t you and El catch up whilst Hop and I talk to Will” his mom says to Mike

Will gives a “I want him to stay” at the same time Mike says “Mrs. Byers, we really didn’t-”

She smiles at them both

“I know you didn’t. And Will, it’s *okay* , you’re not actually in trouble, don’t worry” she reassures them, ignoring his dad’s “*Speak for yourself*” as she continues “But I just think it would be best if you were with El”

“Come on Mike” El chimes in “We can listen to Corey Hart whilst we talk”

---

Fifteen minutes later, Will finds himself sitting on the couch in the living room with his mom next to him, both of them coffee in hand, watching his dad pace up and down.

“Calm down, Hop” his mom says reassuringly “You’re overreacting”

“Am I?” his dad says bitterly

“Look, Dad, is it *me* you have a problem with-”

“Honey” his mom puts her arm around his shoulder “It’s ok”

His dad stops his pacing, pinching the bridge of his nose

“Will, I don’t have a problem with you. I *promise* you I don’t have a problem with you.”

“Then, I don’t understand what’s going on. I don’t understand what the *problem* is. I don’t understand why you’re so angry. We told you, I just had a nightmare”

“What am I supposed to think, Will? After what I saw last night. I walk in on you both, like *that* and then the way you were both talking this morning-”

“He was asking me if I was *ok*”

“Yeah I *bet* he was ” he mutters “Am I really supposed to believe that?”

“Yes . We weren’t doing anything. Yesterday was only our first kiss, you don’t have to worry about that yet”

“*Jesus* , kid”

“Why don’t you tell me exactly what happened, Will?” His mom adds softly

“I told you, I saw them-”

“I want to hear it from Will” she cuts him off, no room for argument in her tone

Will sighs, turning to face his mom slightly

“I had a nightmare and it woke Mike up. He could see I was a little shaken up so he offered to share with me to make me feel better, you know, the way he did as a kid when you and Lonnie would have a fight”

“What was the nightmare about? Are you ok now?” his mom frets

*Absolutely fine, Mom he thinks Just having recurring nightmares about a being from an interdimensional world that may or may not still be a part*

*of me.*

Of course he can't tell her, not yet anyway. He doesn't want her to worry. He doesn't want anyone to worry, which is part of the reason he's trying to keep El out of his head. He knows that she'll tell their parents at the slightest hint of something being wrong

*Friends don't lie*

Except when it's about alternate dimensions.

"I'm fine" he reassures his mom "It *did* help, having him close"

She looks skeptical but drops the subject with a simple "Ok. You know where I am if you need me"

He feels guilty for lying but he knows that it's only going to worry her, and she's already had to deal with more worries than anyone should.

"Don't forget what happened yesterday" his dad reminds, expression still furious

"Hop" his mom warns, before turning back to Will

"Sweetie, I don't mind you and Mike sharing a room-"

His dad scoffs as she says it. His mom ignores him.

"But if you and Mike are starting to *explore* and take things-"

He cuts her off

"Look, it really *was* our first kiss. We just got carried away. That's it, I swear. So can we *please* stop talking about it now"

“Okay. I believe you” his mom reassures him, smiling softly

“I’m not sure I do” his dad responds, frowning “You sure looked awfully cozy”

“Now Hop-” she says “I *do* trust Will. I trust that they know what they’re doing, and *if* they make the decision to take anything further-”

Will feels his face flush, but neither of his parents seem to notice and he’s grateful.

“Mom, please stop” he mumbles, interrupting. He turns to his dad “Look, Dad, I know you didn’t know me and Mike when we were little kids, but we’ve always been *close* . It’s just even closer now that we’re dating. It *is* a new relationship, but it’s based on years of friendship. It *really was* our first kiss, and we *really* don’t need to be talking about this, so can I go now?”

His mom nods in agreement, and continues her earlier point

“I trust them to be sensible. I’d be a hypocrite if I gave them restrictions I didn’t give Jonathan and Nancy. Making them keep secrets only ends up worse in the first place. I’d rather know they’re being safe in the house, than god knows where else. You should know better than anyone the places teenagers go, and what they do-you used to tell me way too many stories about Chrissy Carp-”

“Hey, hey, the kid doesn’t need to hear about that” He stops her at the same time Will pleads with them to stop talking.

Gross. He really didn’t need a play by play of his dad’s high school hobbies

His dad sighs after a small lull in the conversation, all parties thinking over his mom’s words

“Look, son” he says “I just want you to be sure with any choices that

you make”

*What I am sure of is that this conversation has been pointless*

“So. I want to enforce a camp bed rule” his dad adds

“What? No. I swear we’re *not*—”

“Yes I heard you. You’re my kid and I’m going to listen and I’m going to trust you. But I wouldn’t have allowed it if it were Mike and El, so I feel like it’s not fair to allow you and Mike different privileges”

He looks between his parents, eyes landing on his mom

“Mom- *please*. Jonathan and Nancy didn’t have to use a camp bed. This has happened *one time* and it’s because I had a *nightmare*. Why are you punishing me for that? ”

“We’re not punishing you” She says, and Will feels his chest swell up with hope “*But-* ”

*Traitor*

“Your dad is right, and I do want to be fair to you all. Jonathan hadn’t ever actually asked me if Nancy could sleep over before he was an adult. There was a lot of sneaking involved. It doesn’t mean we don’t trust you, we’re just setting and discussing some healthy boundaries. You can still share a room whenever he stays over, but, camp bed from now on”

Will groans into his coffee.



---

“He hates me” Mike starts, pacing around the room, avoiding looking at El, who was currently laying on her bed, magazine in hand

“He doesn’t hate you” She replies

“He wants me gone”

“If you’d have answered me when I knocked at the door after me and Hop got back in from the cinema, this wouldn’t have happened”

He glares at her and finally, she looks up from her magazine and sends him a grin.

Mike sighs before walking over to the bed, moving her legs out of the way with a quick ‘*move over*’ and joining her, top and tailing.

“I just don’t understand why this has become a big *thing* .” Mike rubs at his eyes with his palms, “I didn’t do anything wrong, Will did nothing wrong. Hopper is once again, out to get me and ruin my relationship. He’s conspiring, I’m telling you”

El lets out a small laugh, rolling her eyes, before putting down her magazine. “So,” she begins, “What did happen at the *sleepover*?”

“Don’t say it like that, it sounds *weird*. Last night, he really did have a nightmare”

El nods to herself “He still gets them sometimes- I can feel it. He gets so scared. He hasn’t told me what they’re about though, but I can imagine”

“Did you feel it yesterday?”

She’s quiet for a moment, thinking about it. Mike somewhat expected as much, especially with Will’s words of “*El doesn’t need to know everything*” but knowing that she had felt it before but this time was stalling in giving her answer, wasn’t *exactly* reassuring. After a moment, she shakes her head a confused look on her face “No. I don’t think so.”

“Right. Because at 4am last night, we were on lightbulb clear up duty”

If Mike wasn't feeling very reassured before, the look on her face at that moment was certainly not making him feel any better

“Can you do me a favour?” she nods “Let me know if *that* continues- you not being able to *connect* , or however it works. And the broken lightbulbs. That too.”

“Mike it's probably nothing. These nightmares don't *feel* nice, maybe Will just doesn't want me to feel it too”

“But he hasn't blocked you from feeling them before?”

She doesn't answer

“I'm saying this for your sake too, ok? I just worry about it- these *powers*. I mean it's great, that they're coming back for you but something about it, how it works with Will. It doesn't *feel* right.”

“We're careful, we can handle it”

“Doesn't it just seem odd to you?”

“The Upside Down, The Mindflayer- it *will* do these things to you. We've both experienced that place”

Mike frowns, “I dunno, maybe I'm thinking about it too much. Just- let me know, ok? I don't want anything happening to either of you”

“It won't- but I'll let you know. If *anything* changes” she nods giving him a small smile “But what *can* change now is the music. Want me to change it? Will was saying not that long ago he was telling you to

listen to things that *aren't* Corey Hart”

He gives a small laugh before rolling his eyes “It’s ok, I don’t mind really. Definitely change the song though, *Silent Talking* was never my favourite”

She nods, focussing her attention to the cassette player and, after a short while he hears a familiar sound, signifying that the tape was forwarding to the next track. She stops and the track sounds just past the beginning of *Waiting For You*, El looking at him with a proud grin.

They’re quiet, content with listening to the music and occasional small talk, usually in reference to things Max had spoken about in their recent phone calls.

“How are you, by the way?” El says after a little while

“Yeah we’re good-”

“No. Not you and Will. *You*. We haven’t really had time to just talk since you’ve been here”

He thinks for a moment “I’m- yeah. I’m great. Really great”

“And you’re happy now?”

“I am. Where’s all this coming from anyway? Should I not be happy?”  
He laughs nervously

“It wasn’t nice, seeing you how you were last Christmas- and before. I didn’t like it so thought I would check in” El gives a small shrug and smiles at him.

He felt grateful really, knowing that despite everything they could

still be like *this*. That he could still have his *friend*.

“He worries about how you’re feeling when you’re back in Hawkins. I worry as well. I know you have Nancy and The Party you can talk to but-”

He nods as she trails off, looking down at his hands “It’s- It’s hard to explain. Max, Lucas, Dustin, Nancy, I *know* they’re fine with everything, I mean you were part of what went down at Christmas so you know how fine they are with it all. But there’s that part of me that just feels so *on edge*. My parents are a different subject all together but” he sighs, meeting her gaze “ *Here* , with you, your mom, Jonathan, Hop- I guess- With *Will* , I don’t have that feeling. I’m just *calm* .”

He absentmindedly looks at the door for a moment, faintly hearing what he can pick out as Mrs Byers followed by, what he can just about make out as ‘*Mom, I know, can I go now?*’

Mike sits up, crossing his legs leaning his elbows on his knees, and El follows

“I don’t like that this feels like it has to be a secret. I don’t.”

“No?”

“No.” He pauses for a moment, considering his next words, “I told him yesterday- well we told each other-“

“I know” El grins

“I still find the connection business *creepy*, you know?”

“I know that as well”

He rolls his eyes before continuing, “My point is, I don’t understand

why I have to keep that a secret at home. It didn't have to be a secret with you- well, for the most part.

"And it just frustrates me because I feel *good* and I'm at a point where I can say to myself '*I am dating a boy*' which I know sounds *silly* because *obviously* I'm dating Will, but this big part of me, this big part of who I am, I have to be so careful with sharing it and it *sucks* "

El takes hold of his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze, he smiles up at her "Can't your mom just adopt me or something? Would make life easier"

"I don't think dad would like *that* very much" she laughs, "He looked annoyed enough when I came in for breakfast, I don't know how he would feel if we suddenly told him you were going to *live* with us"

"Oh, you should have seen him when he walked in. I don't think I've seen someone turn so red"

"His face always did go like a tomato" she smirks, "Glad I'm not part of *that* again"

He pushes her "Thanks for the support"

Before El can say anymore, the bedroom door opens and Will walks in, rubbing at his eyes, sitting at his sister's desk with a groan.

Mike and El glance at one another, and then look to Will before she picks up her magazine, once again, simply stating "Well that sounded like a fun conversation"

Will removes his hands from his eyes sending her a glare

"*Really* fun." Mike begins, smirking "I think a highlight was-"

"Oh *screw you*. Both of you. You're so lucky you didn't have to sit through that"

*Well I kind of already have before* he grimaces

“Just feel lucky you weren’t *threatened* in his truck” He adds, “He locked me in, we drove home while he *talked at me* and all I could do was nod as he *made me agree*” he turns his head back to face El “How can you say he doesn’t hate me?”

“We weren’t really helping ourselves”

“So you think I deserved it? Are you *all* out to get me?”

“I’m sorry-“ Will interrupts “But when did this become about you?”

“I think you’ll find that the only reason you got that talk in the first place was because of *me*”

“Well then, where were you for moral support in there?”

“As much as I would have *loved* to have stayed I think you’ll remember that your mom told me to leave.”

“Choosing my mom over your boyfriend. Way to suck up to the parents, Mike”

Will reaches for the small pile of cassette tapes on El’s desk, sorting through them until he finds *Aladdin Sane*. It was one that Jonathan had given her last Christmas, as she *needed to expand her musical interests* . She barely listened to it, but Will liked it, so she said she kept it around so he could put it on whilst they were studying together. Will stops the current song, presses eject and switches the tapes. As *Watch that Man* starts to play, he searches for the *Boy in the Box* case and can’t find it, so he puts the tape in the Bowie case instead.

“Hey!” El calls out to her brother “Put it in the right one. You know that annoys me”

"Maybe if we swap the tapes, you'll finally listen to some good music for once" Will retorts, standing from the desk chair, and walking over to the bed, sitting down next to him "Stop being a bad influence on Mike"

"I don't *actually* hate Corey Hart" Mike tells him, nudging Will slightly "And besides, when did this *become about me?*" he grins at his boyfriend

Will grins back and before Mike can say anything else, he feels Will's lips on his own. He'd moved so quickly that Mike barely caught it. He kisses back softly before pulling away, grin intensified. He can't quite comprehend that this is his life now. That he's *allowed* to do this, allowed to be here, with Will, with his *boyfriend*. He's just about to lean in again, when he hears

"This is why Dad hates you" El chimes in, looking back down and turning a page in her magazine.

Mike leans over, not taking his eyes away from Will and plucks the magazine out of her hands, tossing it on the floor

"Dad doesn't hate him, El" Will rolls his eyes at her

"He does" Mike adds, and whilst he is joking, he knows that there is a part of Hopper that doesn't particularly care for him, and he hates how that makes him feel. He doesn't want to be on bad terms with *The Parents* forever.

"He *doesn't*" Will stresses "He's just-"

"Overprotective?" El interrupts "Overbearing? *Overdramatic?*"

"How about all of the above?" Will sighs "It's just. I don't get it. And I *really* didn't need them to talk to me again, *especially* when there isn't anything new to talk about" he rests his head in his hands "But, I'm just so glad, *so glad* it's not *me* he has the problem with. I don't know what I would have done if he'd had a problem with me being gay. I'm still worried he does"

"Hey" Mike says, placing a comforting hand on Will's shoulder, rubbing it slightly "It's *okay*. As annoying as it is, he is just looking

out for you. You know your mom wouldn't keep him around if he had a problem with you. He's just acting the way parents act when their kids are in relationships - if anything he was even worse with me and El"

"I guess" Will mutters

"Besides" Mike adds "If he ever has a problem with it, I could take him"

Will laughs "He owns a gun, Mike"

"Two, actually" El helpfully informs them

"Two guns, Mike. You wouldn't stand a chance" Will pauses and takes Mike's hand "But *thank you* "

And as Mike leans over to kiss Will again, a pillow hits the side of his head before their lips can meet

"*El!* What was that for?" he grabs the pillow turning to throw it back. She hasn't moved from her earlier position, but a small trickle of blood escapes her nose. He aims the pillow but she stops it before it can hit her, and it falls to the bed instead. She rolls her eyes at him and, as she wipes at her nose, provides them both with a simple

"*Get a room*"

*I was right, Mike thinks, She definitely spends too much time with Max.*

---

**April 16th 1987, Hawkins, Indiana.**

"Where is she?" Steve asks, tapping his fingers against the cash desk



at *Family Video*.

It was a Thursday afternoon, and The Party had dropped by after school to hang out with Steve and Robin for a bit at the start of their shift. The store was dead, as it usually was on a Thursday, and they were currently the only customers.

“Dude, calm down” Dustin reassures “She’ll be here”

“Yeah, she’s probably just running late” Max adds

“It’s *Robin*” Steve stresses “She’s a mess sometimes but she’s never *running late*”

Mike thought he was being a little bit dramatic, but he decided not to comment. He walks over to the *Stand By Me* display Steve had *proudly* set up upon the film’s release, picking up one of the tapes, opening the case, closing it, and placing it back down on the display again on Steve’s call of ‘*Hey, you ruin the display, you’re making it again ok?*’ He rolls his eyes but continues to look through the display.

*This actually sounds pretty good, he thinks, maybe one for the next Party movie night.*

His thoughts are interrupted by Steve’s ‘*finally!*’ echoing across the store.

Mike turns around just in time to see Robin burst through the door “Where have you bee-heh, Robin, what happened? What’s *wrong?*” the tone in Steve’s voice changes the second he looks at Robin’s face.

“Nothing, dingus” she retorts, and Mike notices that her voice sounds stifled almost as if she had a cold “Stop being distracted by your children, and get back to work” She slings her backpack under the counter, and starts to pin her name tag to her shirt, her head low.

Mike glances to the rest of The Party to see them sharing a confused look, before looking over to Steve who moves a step closer to Robin, taking a hold of her wrist and lifting her head to meet his gaze “No, what’s up?”

“Nothin-” she says, pulling out of his grasp

“Hey, have you been *crying*?” Steve interrupts

“Yeah, from knowing I have to spend all evening with you” She snaps back as she absentmindedly starts to tidy the cash desk. Mike notices Steve frown at the tone, clearly not used to it. They always joked with each other, and a lot of that involved mocking jokes, but the tone of Robin’s voice this time seemed harsher than normal.

“Robin” Steve replies, voice serious “What happened?”

“Yeah” Dustin chimes in, leaning over the desk, and placing his hand on top of her own. She stops her fiddling with the stapler she’d been positioning and repositioning next to the register.

“My *incredibly* homophobic aunt is in town” she explodes, but a calm expression appears on her face after she says it. Mike recognises it as a feeling he has experienced before, that moment after you can finally let out what’s been eating away at you for so long. Even though the situation isn’t any better, just for a moment, you *are*.

Robin sighs, and when she speaks again her voice is quieter, dejected “And she had some *things* to say”

“*Bitch!*”

“Dustin, you can’t call her aunt a bitch” Lucas slaps his arm

“She is a bitch” Robin retorts, laughing slightly before sighing again “My parents are *so* cool with it all, with *me* , but when our family visits I just wonder if I’m making more problems than it’s worth”

“Robin, you’re *not* a problem” Max stresses

“*I know* . I *do* know that. It’s just -”

“*Hard*” Mike finishes for her, before he can stop himself.

“Yeah” Robin agrees, giving him a look, and he swiftly pulls away his gaze “It really is”

“Wow between River Phoenix over here” Steve says, gesturing at Mike “And your family drama, this shift just got a lot more depressing”

Robin pushes him, but smiles nonetheless

“What are you even talking about?” Mike asks, rolling his eyes.

“River Phoenix?” Steve asks, raising his eyebrow when Mike gives him a ‘*I don’t know what that means*’ “He’s in the movie” he adds, gesturing to the *Stand by Me* display. Mike shrugs

“I didn’t put that display together for you to just take apart when you want, Wheeler. You’re meant to *watch* movies, not just open and close the VHS case”

Mike flips him off. Steve rolls his eyes, before turning back to Robin.

“For real, are you ok?” Mike hears him ask “Do you want the evening off? It’ll be a pretty quiet night, I’ll be fine alone” he reassures her. She shakes her head, going back to playing with the stapler.

“*More than happy* to help, too” Dustin adds, and at Steve and Robin’s glance he defends himself “I’m here enough, I could probably do a better job in one night than Steve’s done in his entire career ”

“I’m not really one for child labour, Henderson”

“I’m almost *seventeen*. Not a kid. Need I remind you that we fought *evil Russians and* Interdimensional beings *and* lived to tell the tale? ”

“And yet, I bet you don’t even know how to operate a cash register”

Robin chimes in

“You were working at *Scoops* at seventeen, it can’t be that hard”

“Yeah well my expert decoding of a secret Russian message shows that I’m *clearly* smarter than you” she exaggerates her point by aiming the stapler toward him, clicking it a few times.

Dustin reaches to grab it, and they tussle for a few moments, fighting over it. Robin remains victorious, and keeps hold of the stapler, letting out a “*hah!*”.

Steve rolls his eyes with a not so subtle ‘*children*’. Dustin steps back from the desk a little, and Robin leans so her elbows are against it and her head is in her hands.

“Look” she sighs “Thank you. All of you, but I’ll be fine. It’s shitty, but I’m cool. I could use the distraction, really. I left the house just as her and my mom started fighting”

“*Yikes*” Max sympathises. Robin nods at her grimace.

It’s then that the ring of the bell indicating a customer breaks them all out of the bubble they were in. They all jump away from the cash desk, except for Mike whose own jump almost causes the display to topple. He steadies himself just in time, and looks to the door to see a middle aged couple walk through the door. Steve and Robin immediately move to look busy, Steve asking if he can help them. Robin stays by the cash register, but with an out of character smile on her face. Mike knew that the owner of *Family Video* had a lot of friends in town, and Steve and Robin always tried to stay in the good books of unfamiliar customers, as they didn’t know who would tattle back to him.

“Thanks for all your help” Max calls to Steve as he walks toward the *new releases* section of the store. He gives them a wave, and Max, Lucas and Dustin walk over to where Mike is standing.

“Hey, I’ll meet you outside ok? I figure it’s time I check this out” he picks up the *Stand By Me* case from earlier. The Party shrug before walking out of the door, removing their bikes from the rack

He walks over to Robin, who was absent mindedly tapping at the buttons on the cash register. He silently hands over the box, and she gives him a curious look before starting to ring it up.

“It wasn’t cool. What your aunt said”

Robin looks up from the register

“Really wasn’t cool. I hate that she was like that with you, you don’t deserve that”

“Look, Mike-”

“She *knows you* . She’s known you forever, and for her to just treat you like such *crap* , it’s *bullshit*. You’re not different, you haven’t suddenly changed because you like girls or like both. For her to say that- to say that to *you*. It’s not her that doesn’t need you in her life, it’s *you* that doesn’t need her.”

She looks at him, tilting her head slightly, almost as though she’s processing his words, thinking about what to say next- a look of curiosity expressed across her face. He swallows hard, holding her gaze as her expression softens, blinking a few times. She goes to say something, stopping herself.

But he feels he knows what she was going to say and *nods*.

“Do you know that? What you’ve just told me, about not being different. Do you know that as well?”

“This isn’t about me right now-”

“*Chill* Wheeler, I’m just checking in. We may as well stick together, right?”

He pauses for a moment before answering with a small “I’m getting there. I’ve- well I’ve had a lot of help with that”

She raises an eyebrow “Oh really?”

“Well, yeah” he shrugs, self consciously

“That’ll be \$3” she holds out her hand, and Mike scrambles to get some coins out of his back pocket. He hands them over and she slots them in the cash register, and puts his rental on the desk, before looking back up at him.

“So, this *help*- does it have a name?”

Mike puts his hands in his coat pockets, rocking on his feet before straightening up and crossing his arms

“So yes then” she smirks “So who’s the lucky guy, or girl. I don’t judge”

“A *guy*” he blurts quickly, then lowers his voice “Will. It’s Will”

“*Byers?* Mixtape Boy?”

“*Mixtape boy?* What’s that supposed to mean? ”

“Christmas? You came in here and were being all weird about this mixtape you were making. *Songs that will make him think?*”

*I almost forgot about that* he thinks. It had seemed so long ago now, since he’d come into *Family Video* after being very much cooped up in his room trying to create the mixtape for Will- being faced with *light* questioning about why he was going to this much of an effort to create a Christmas gift he would love. It all seemed so obvious to him now, because *of course* there was a reason for the effort, but he couldn’t help but feel a little strange that though he had been so adamant at the time, so quick to reassure this tape didn’t mean what

they thought it meant, clearly, this was seen through.

“Yeah, *Mixtape Boy*” he mutters as Robin gives a small laugh

“He liked the painfully obvious pining of *Keep On Loving You* by REO *Speedwagon* then?”

“*Stop.*”

She holds her hands up in defeat as he rolls his eyes, taking his backpack off his back, the tape off the desk, and beginning to put it inside.

“Assume everything worked out then?”

“Yeah. Yeah it did” he zips up his backpack and places it back on his back “But really, all of that, what happened with your Aunt. You don’t deserve that. I know it’s easier said than done, but please try not to listen to her”

“Thank you” is all she says in reply, but Mike can see the genuine sincerity on her face

He smiles “We may as well stick together, right?”

She smiles back.

---

“So. When are you going to tell *your* parents?” Dustin asks Mike as they’re walking back from the video store

Mike looks around, making sure they’re alone

“Dude, keep your voice down”

“Mike it’s just us-”

"You never know" he pauses "And I don't know. Not yet. Not now"

"Well, what's the worst that can happen, really? We've all done a *lot* worse."

Mike snorts "Believe it or not, that won't be how my parents see it"

"Either way, they're not going to hate you"

"I don't *think* that they'll hate me, but at the same time, I don't know *what* they'll do. I don't particularly *want* to be disowned."

"Mike, they're not going to disown you" Lucas interrupts, rolling his eyes

"Easy for you to say" Mike mutters "You can't tell me that's *not* going to happen, so stop pestering me about it"

"Dude we didn't mean any harm" Dustin says, holding his hands up in surrender

"Yeah" Lucas adds "I just thought telling them might be nice. You wouldn't have to be so secretive anymore"

"Telling my parents doesn't mean telling *the whole town*. Do you know how many bigoted people there are here? I'm not going to be able to be *open* about this until I'm in college"

"That sounds like a bit of an exaggeration" Dustin says

"Hey" Max chimes in "Don't assume that this is something easy for Mike. I don't know Mr Wheeler *too* well, but even though Mrs. Wheeler is pretty cool, the scary thing about coming out is that you *don't* know how people will react. Mike will tell his parents when - and *only* when - he feels ready, to. We don't rush that. Got it?"

"Got it" Lucas and Dustin echo

Mike stays silent for the rest of the way home. He thinks over Dustin and Lucas' words and really lets himself think about what would



happen if he told his parents. He knows it would surprise them, and he knows they probably wouldn't get it (*Dad, especially*) but he'd like to think that it would be something they'd be able to get through. His mom always reminds him that he can talk to her, and while he doesn't think this is something she had in mind when she says it, he can't help but think, can't help but *hope*, that she'd be understanding. That she'd be cool the way Mrs. Byers was; the way that Robin's parents were.

He says goodbye to his friends one by one as they arrive at their individual houses, until it's just him and Lucas stood at the foot of his driveway. Mike barely remembers getting home.

"Dude, are you ok?" Lucas asks, waving his hand in front of his face

"What?" he replies, shaking his head as if the action would remove the thoughts "Oh, yeah. I'm good. I'll see you tomorrow"

"See you" Lucas echoes, and he gives Mike a curious look before heading toward his own house on Maple.

Mike notices that his father's car isn't in the driveway, meaning that his mom was currently home alone. He wonders if now could be a good moment, not to necessarily *tell* her, but to *talk* to her, to bring up the topic somehow so he can gauge how she'd react. He thinks that if he can figure out what she might say, what she might *do*, it will curb his anxiety a little.

He steadies himself, walking toward the front door. Trying the handle, he notices that it's unlocked and he steps inside, kicking off his shoes.

"Mom? Are you here?" he calls out

"In the kitchen!" she calls back and he shuffles toward her voice

He walks through the entryway, sentence already on his tongue

“Hey mom, can I talk to yo-” but he is shushed by her fingers, which she raises, indicating that she’s on the phone.

“I couldn’t believe it” she replies to whoever is on the phone, and Mike notices it’s in her usual gossip tone “Not until Jackie told me herself. He was having an affair, with another *man*”

Mike feels his heart rate increase “I never would’ve pictured him for a queer. It makes me feel *so* uncomfortable, especially now with this *epidemic* going around”

Mike flinches. Tenses. His fists clench. He turns away from his mom, from this almost conversation, from every thought that for a moment seemed *so* good and heads to his bedroom, heart heavy in his chest.

*Nevermind.*

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading! Follow us both on tumblr  
[@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)

## 5. For once I have something I know won't desert me, I'm not alone anymore

### Summary for the Chapter:

She reaches to take his free hand, giving it a squeeze

“I want you to be the one to give me away”

### Notes for the Chapter:

So. We're sorry this took forever.

Long story short, we had an idea, wrote the majority of the chapter and deleted it.

BUT we're back and this chapter is a two-parter. It was going to be one chapter but the count was a *little* long.

Regardless, we hope you enjoy it! Part 2- which is a direct continuation for the end of this chapter- should be out tomorrow or Saturday so keep a look out!

### Monday April 27th, 1987 - Benton, Illinois.

It happens *again* in the early hours that morning- the dreams now so frequent his *ritual* after has become more a *routine*. He'll wake with a gasp, ground himself, check the lamp- if the bulb is broken, he'll dispose of it in the waste bin- and then he'll attempt to fall back to sleep.

So when his mom begins to ask if '*everything is ok*' as his under eye area becomes darker by the day, he's not entirely surprised.

“Mom, *really*, I'm fine. I just didn't sleep too well last night” He can feel El staring at him across the breakfast table but makes a point of

ignoring her.

“That’s four times now since last week” His mom says, sitting down next to him. She places her coffee down on the table before placing her hand on his forehead, “You don’t feel like you’re getting sick. Maybe you should stay home just in case? Get some rest”

He gently pushes her hand away, moving his hair back into its former position, “Honestly, I’m ok. Don’t worry about me-”

“Are they working you too hard at school? I can call your art teacher and tell them that helping out with scenery for the school play is too much”

“ *Mom!*”

She holds up her hands in defence, mumbling a quick “Ok”

He picks up his spoon, taking a few bites of his cereal, El still staring between bites. A few more spoonfuls is all he can take before he stands from the breakfast table.

“I’ve just remembered. My Bio teacher wants me in early today, got to help set up”

It’s so obviously a lie but he just hopes that his family doesn’t catch on.

“I’ll come with-”

“No.” He interrupts El, “You’re not in my class. You’d just be waiting around. I’ll be home around four”

There’s a part of him that feels bad, the look on her face as he shrugs on his backpack and leaves the house certainly not helping. He’s been avoiding her a little, at least on the *supernaturally inclined* side of

things- their *power building* sessions now virtually non-existent, Will finding himself conveniently busy, retraining himself in private to keep things quiet, or as quiet as he could manage without drawing too much suspicion.

And that's *fine*. He never wanted this anyway. He always said it was a reminder of what happened back in 1984, so allowing himself to have this was a *mistake* he should have never made. He was getting too comfortable, enjoying them *too* much, so, to Will, it was of absolutely no coincidence that the moment he started to let that guard down more and more, the nightmares began.

So after successfully managing to avoid El the majority of the day, only to have her grab hold of his backpack at lunch period before he has time to take his lunch somewhere else that day, Will reluctantly joins her at their usual table.

Neither of them say anything for a short while, El glancing at him between sips of her orange juice and Will picking off the pineapple off the slice of pizza the lunch lady had given him, noting that he seemed to have an awful lot more on his slice than El did. It's when Will feels that familiar *goosebumps* feeling of El trying to breach his emotions, which he successfully blocks, that she finally speaks.

"Is it because Jonathan is Dad's *Best Man* ?"

*He's what?*

"Hang on, Jonathan is Dad's *Best Man* ? When did this happen?"

*And why didn't Jonathan tell me? Why didn't anyone tell me?*

"A couple of days ago. You were doing English homework, but it sounded a lot like you were just on the phone to Dustin. I walked into the living room just as he'd finished asking. It was very sweet" El replies bluntly, picking up her juice, taking another sip, "So, that's not why you're being weird?"

"No."

"Then why *are* you being weird?" El frowns, taking a bite of her pizza.

"I'm *not* being weird" he groans, looking down, removing the last few pieces of pineapple from his own.

"Yes, you are" she insists "You've been weird all day. You've been weird the last few days. Avoiding me, blocking me out"

"You don't have to be in my head all the time, you know" he notes, finally taking a bite out of his now pineapple-free pizza. He looks down at his lunch tray, now full of small pieces of pineapple and really wishes the school would give other options.

"You used to only block me out when you're hiding something. Or when you're with Mike. Mike isn't here, so, you're being weird"

"Maybe I'm thinking about Mike," His voice is higher than usual and he thinks he couldn't be a worse liar if he tried. "Did you consider that?"

She screws up her face

"Gross" still frowning, she prompts him again "But no, you're not. You're being weird. Tell me what's wrong" leaning over, she takes hold of the hand that isn't holding the pizza, squeezing it "I can help"

"El" he sighs "I'm fine"

"Friends don't lie"

“Yeah, well, lucky you’re my sister then” he mutters

“What was that?” she asks, eyebrow raised

“Nothing” shaking his head, he adds “Where is this even coming from? Why do you keep trying to get inside my head?”

“I heard you last night. It happened again, didn’t it?” Will gulps before El continues. “And I just need- *want* to make sure that-”

“Hey guys,” a voice interrupts her.

Will is glad for the distraction, as he really didn’t want to be getting into his nightly routine in the school cafeteria. Looking up from the table, Will gives a confused smile to a *familiar* face- Nick, “Room for one more?” He asks sheepishly before Will gives a slow nod, prompting him to sit down next to El- who grins at him in return.

*Well this is a surprise.* He thinks as Nick crosses his arms, placing his elbows on the table.

He’d been trying to get Nick to sit with them for weeks now. Being in the same Art Class, they still spoke pretty often and despite their breakup, Will did miss having him around. He was a genuinely nice guy - especially when it came to the whole *Mike situation* - and Will hoped they could stay friends.

“Why are you?-" Will begins, trailing off towards the end, looking over at El, then back to Nick

“El and I have been talking, after we saw each other at the diner,” he gestures between himself and El, “and, well-”

“ I invited him. That’s ok, right Will? You did say I should during Spring Break”

“Yeah- yeah of course. It’s nice to see you, I’m just surprised. Mainly because *I’ve* asked you to sit with us, *multiple times* . So really, I’m just wondering what changed, I guess.”

“I did need *time* , Will.”

“No, I know, I did too,” Will ignores El’s frown from across the table, they really didn’t need to get into the semantics of things right now. “I’m just glad we’re ok”

“Me too” he pauses “So, how’s the undead dad?”

Will shoots El a quick look, but she’s focused on Nick and misses it.

“He’s fine” she informs him “Angry at Will most of the time because of how long he spends on the phone, so it’s safe to say he’s recovered”

Nick gives a small laugh “What happened to him, anyway? It all sounds very-”

“Weird?” Will finishes for him

Laughing again, Nick agrees “Yeah. Weird”

When neither he or El speak, Nick hurries to reassure them “You don’t have to tell me, not if you don’t want to”

“It’s not that we don’t *want* to” El hesitates, thinking over her words carefully “It’s that we *can’t*”

“Legally, she means” Will adds, noting Nick’s surprise at the seriousness of his tone “It’s a lot of-”

“Shared trauma?” Nick smiles reassuringly

“Shared trauma” Will and El echo

“Long story short. We thought he was dead, but he’d really been taken by some-”



“Bad men” El interrupts

“Bad men” Will agrees “A family friend and our mom did some research, and we were able to find him alive and bring him home. It’s very complicated”

Nick lets out a low whistle “It sounds complicated” turning to El, he adds “But no matter how complicated, I’m so glad you’ve gotten him back”

El smiles “Me too”

“Even if he does like to stare out Mike whenever he comes over” Will rolls his eyes “ I guess one good thing about the breakup is you don’t have to deal with him”

“ *Actually* ” El starts, stringing out the first syllable “He *really* liked you, Nick. Said you had a good handshake and that you’re a nice kid”

“I’m sorry, but whose side are you on here?” Will frowns

“No one’s” she rolls her eyes “But wow, *you’re* starting to sound like *Mike* ” El reaches across the table, poking him in the shoulder, Will brushing her hand away promptly after.

“She *is* right, you know. I only had the *pleasure* of hanging out with him for a few days and that was a *very* Mike thing to say” Nick says in agreement, taking a sip of his can of *Coke*.

“What happened to you being a good ex-boyfriend?” Will asks

Nick raises an eyebrow “I think I’m entitled to a *few* digs”

Will rolls his eyes again, but gives Nick a smile.

There is only small talk for a little whilst they eat. Sharing ‘ *How are yous?*’ and complaining about the very limited food options Benton High School had to offer. It’s just as Will is wiping his mouth to remove any pizza sauce, that Nick speaks again

“So, El was saying that you-”

“Ok, that’s the second time you’ve said that. Since when do you and El talk?”

“We don’t- well not really. But yeah, sometimes” Nick shrugs, nonchalant, causing Will to frown.

*If all of those don’t mean entirely different things.*

“I’m allowed to have friends outside of you and The Party, Will” El adds

“I didn’t say you weren’t” he defends himself “I just didn’t realise Nick was one of them” gesturing to Nick, he adds “He never mentions in class that you speak”

“Well, we *do* and he is my friend. Right, Nick?”

“Yeah, of course” He smiles “Your sister is kinda cool, Will”

“She’s alright, I guess,” He says with a shrug, looking back down to his now, nearly empty, tray save for a can of *Pepsi* he’d picked up by mistake, a small pile of pineapple he’d removed from his pizza, and an apple.

“You’re being weird again” El adds “Why?”

“I’m not being weird. This-” he says, gesturing between her and Nick “Was unexpected. But it’s cool, I’m glad you have a friend”

“We’re *all* friends, Will” Nick smiles

“I know, but- never mind, it’s just nice to see” Will rushes, taking another quick look between the both of them before taking a bite out of his apple.

He notices Nick and El give each of a look before turning back to him. It's fleeting, but he catches it, and the action only serves to make him more confused. He really *doesn't* have a problem with them being friends, he loves that two people he cares about can still get along despite everything that happened. It's more the idea that this friendship seemed to blossom without him having any idea it was happening in the first place. He knew that they'd seen each other at the diner but, as far as he knew, that's where *this* ended and if he was being honest with himself, it did hurt him a little that neither of them thought to tell him. He shakes the thought, bringing himself back into the moment, seeing El looking at his tray.

"What?"

"Can I have your pineapple?"

Will grimaces, "Sure, anything to get rid of it from in front of me"

He takes his *Pepsi* from the tray, before pushing it in front of her. She grins at him before picking up a piece and popping it into her mouth. Will rolls his eyes, opening his can and taking a sip, glancing at El as he does so- not missing the way she smiles when Nick takes a piece too, muttering "*More for us, right?*"

And another thought comes into his head, one that he doesn't particularly like, but something that was becoming more and more evident that he was struggling with on a personal level.

Something that despite assurances, despite apologies, despite being told "*We're all friends*" he finds hard to shake. Mixed with the latest revelation that Jonathan was his dad's *Best Man* and he's, seemingly, the last to know and *apparently* despite the history and everything they'd been through, he wasn't even considered for the position.

Will can't help but feel like *second best* .

He's grateful when the bell rings, signalling the end of the lunch period. Nick gives them a goodbye before heading off to his fifth period, and El and Will head to their own - Bio and English respectively. The classroom's aren't too far apart, so they walk part of the way together

"What was that about?" Will asks, as they walk down the hall

"What was what about?"

"You and Nick?"

"You wanted him to sit with us, so I got him to sit with us"

"Yeah, which was nice. But you and Nick were all-" he gestures vaguely with his hands

"I don't know what you're talking about" she says, as they reach her classroom door

He raises an eyebrow "Friends don't lie"

"Yeah, well, good job you're my brother then" is all she says, before giving him a quick goodbye and making her way into the room.

---

**Sunday, May 10th 1987 - Benton, Illinois.**

"Hey Mom, where is everyone?" Will asks that Sunday morning as he walks into the living room. He'd had a little lie in today; he and El had been up quite late studying for finals and hadn't gotten to sleep until around two in the morning. He notices that the clock on the fireplace says it's a little after eleven. He'd gone to say hi to El this morning, but it seemed she'd already gone out for the day. The house

is strangely quiet, save for his mom, who looks up at him from where she's sat on the couch, flicking through bridal catalogues.

"Good morning, honey" she says, smiling "Dad took your sister out into town, she needs more school supplies and Jonathan is at work" He gives a small noise in agreement, before making his way toward the couch. He sits down next to her, leaning over and peering into the magazine, pointing at one of the dresses before looking up at her and saying "I think this would suit you"

"You think? Even the colour?"

"Yeah" he agrees "It's nice. I was skeptical about the blue, but I think El was right, it *does* look nice"

"I think so, too," she smiles again "I think we're allowed to change the rules a little, after everything we've been through. Plus, we've both been married before, it would be boring if it was all the same again"

He nods in agreement, and they sit in a comfortable silence as she flips through the catalogue - Will occasionally giving his opinion - and circles anything she likes.

"Do you have more studying to do, today?" she asks after a while, apropos of nothing

"A little" he admits sheepishly "But not as much as yesterday. We managed to get on top of it. Why?"

"Well, if you spent as much time studying as you did on the phone-" but she's smiling, and nudges him playfully

He rolls his eyes, nudging back

"I asked because I was wondering if you could spare an hour or two to go get ice cream with me?"

"Sure?" he replies, raising an eyebrow, "Is no-one staying inside the house today?"

"Well, I just think we should take advantage of the weather"

So it's an hour later when Will finds himself, *Peanut Butter and Chocolate* tub in hand, walking down north main street, using his spoon to take a sample of his mom's own *Mint Choc-Chip*.

"Hey!" she laughs, dodging his attempt for a second spoonful "You wanted Mint? You should of asked for it"

"Where would be the fun in that?" he grins, and she smiles too, holding out her tub so he can take another scoop

"Thanks" he says, mouth full of ice cream, and he notices she looks happy, so happy in fact that she doesn't even chide him for talking with food in his mouth

"You used to do this all the time when you were little" she notes, swiping some peanut butter and chocolate this time

"Do what?" he asks

"Steal *my* food" she jests, reaching for his tub again. He lets her. "Whenever we'd go out for food, you'd choose something, but then just try to eat mine instead"

His mom doesn't talk about his childhood often, at least not about the years before Lonnie left anyway. He figures that it must be really hard for her, to remember the time where they were some semblance of a family. After he left, she *was* happier - at least that's what Jonathan says - and she talks about those memories fondly, but whilst Lonnie was still there, whilst he was still supposed to at least be *trying* to be their dad, those times were often best left forgotten. He knows that she loves him and Jonathan more than anything, but he's not as naive as he was when he was younger, and he knows that Lonnie left scars that even she has only recently acknowledged. He notices her smile has become slightly more subdued, and he tries to keep the conversation light hearted.

"I'm sure you didn't bring me out here on this sunny day to lecture

me about how I always used to steal your food” he nudges into her slightly, offering out his ice cream to her again. She laughs, taking another scoop and he notices her smile is back. They turn into Benton Community Park, which is full of people taking advantage of the weather.

“You got me” she admits after she finishes her bite, wiping some of the peanut butter from her bottom lip “It is a nice day to be outside, but I thought ice cream might be a nice preface to what I want to talk to you about”

*Well there’s now many things that could mean.*

“Are we moving again?” he asks, concerned. As much as he misses his friends, he *does* love Benton. His time here had truly been full of so many moments where he could be his complete self. Once the thought enters his mind, he can’t shake it. He’d only be willing to move again *if* it was back to Hawkins

“No we’re not moving” She says, stopping next to a bench. She sits down, and gestures toward the space next to her “Sit with me. My back is hurting from all this walking”

He sits down slowly, giving her a confused glance

“You’re not-you’re not pregnant? I know you said no before, but you *can* me if you are-”

“No honey, the answer hasn’t changed from last time” she pauses “It’s actually about the wedding”

“Oh”

“I know you know that Jonathan has been asked to be your dad’s best man”

He nods.

And in the little over a week since finding out in the school cafeteria, he also knew that El had been asked to be one of their mom's bridesmaids - along with Nancy. He wasn't *jealous*, per se, but he had felt a slight pang of sadness that his whole family were involved except for him. Ultimately, he knew it was up to his parents and them alone, but he would have liked to have been *in* the ceremony in some way rather than just *at* the ceremony.

"Yeah" he replies "El was super excited"

"I know it might have seemed like we were leaving you out"

*Yes it did*, he thinks

"No it didn't" he says

She smiles "Yes, it did" still smiling she adds "The reason why neither of us have asked you yet was because I was waiting for the right moment"

"Right moment for what?" he frowns at her

She reaches to take his free hand, giving it a squeeze

"I want you to be the one to give me away"

*Oh.*

He doesn't really know what to say, not really. His first thought is that surely, out of the two of them, Jonathan would have been the better choice. He was the oldest, more mature and acted, for Will in particular, as not only a brother but also a father figure. Where Will



was allowed to play D&D in Mike's basement, and focus on creating imaginary worlds with friends, Jonathan was always out working, taking Will places, and helping around the house. Will had offered a few times whilst they were still in Hawkins, to get a paper route but Jonathan had always told him '*You don't need to worry, I've got mom covered if she needs any help*'. He was always providing, whereas Will, well, all he did was cause trouble.

But, he can see the way his mom is watching him now, waiting for his answer. He notices the eagerness on her face, the way that her eyes are lit up, the way that she's smiling. She'd asked the question so surely, and without hesitation that he knows her mind is made up. So his second thought is that he wanted to see his mom like this *always*. She'd known so much loss, so much *grief*, and he never wants her to face that again. So, if he gets to be a part of that, if he gets to be such a big part of her day and *give her away* to someone who makes her the happiest she'd been in a long time, who makes their *whole family* the happiest they've been in a long time, well then there's no question about it.

*Of course* he said yes

---

They arrive home around four in the afternoon. He can see both Jonathan's and his dad's car in the driveway so he's confused when they open the door and he's met with silence. It doesn't last long however and only a few moments later he is met with an armful of *El*, who pulls him into a bone crushing hug.

"Did you say yes?!" she asks, voice muffled by her head in his shirt

"Of course I- wait?" he pulls away "How long have you known?"

"A couple of weeks" she grins "Are you mad at me for making you stress even more about not being involved"

He rolls his eyes “I wasn’t *stressed*. Come here”

And he pulls her back in for another hug.

Turns out, El hadn’t needed more school supplies (“*but I did convince Dad to buy me a new backpack, it’s holographic*”) and the real reason they’d gone out for the day was to get ingredients for the surprise Sunday dinner his dad and Jonathan (“*And I helped too!*” El protested “*Kid, you put the waffles in the ice box and made sure the whipped cream was in date*”) had made.

“You didn’t have to do all of this” Will said “Being taken for ice cream was enough”

“Nonsense,” His dad reassured as they sat down to eat “I know that for so long it was just you three, and that both you boys are so protective of your mom. But not only have you - both of you - have taken El in as a sister, you’ve now let me be your dad-” he stops for a moment, as if contemplating how to say what he wants to say next “It wasn’t even that long ago that I thought I had that taken away from me, and I never thought I’d be a dad again, but now to have you, to have all *three of you* , it’s more than I could’ve imagined. Thank you for letting me be that, and for letting me have the chance to look after your mom. Well-” he smirks at his mom “As much as she’ll let me, we all know she can fend for herself”

“Yeah she can” Will agrees, and he hears his own voice sounding a little choked up “But I’m glad she doesn’t have to anymore”

“Sorry to break up the moment but this special dinner we’ve made is getting *really* cold” Jonathan jests, putting a bowl of carrots down onto the table.

“Oh, shush” Their mom jokingly scolds, wiping at her eyes. Their dad’s words hadn’t just had an impact on Will and both El and his mom were very misty eyed “I’m very grateful for all my boys” she smiles, scruffing up Will’s hair, who rolls his eyes in response “And

my daughter - who I always secretly wanted" (*"Oh, thanks" Will and Jonathan echo. Their mom rolls her eyes*)

"My point is , I'm feeling very loved. But enough about me, Jonathan is right- the food is getting cold"

El holds up her glass

"To Mom and Dad" she toasts

*"To Mom and Dad"*

---

The phone rings at 6:45pm that evening, with El letting out a huffed *'he's late'*. They'd all been sitting around in the living room after dinner, eating *Triple Decker Eggo Extravaganza's*, watching TV and casually wedding planning. His mom and dad had been perusing the catalogues again, with Will, El and Jonathan occasionally making their opinions heard.

"Will, can you get it? And tell Mike I'll pick it up in a minute from my room?" El stands, making her way into the kitchen to dump her plate.

"Want me to pre-warn him that you're mad at him?" He asks, making his way to the landline in the hallway

"No. Leave that to me." She calls out, taking a glass from the kitchen cabinet.

And he picks up the phone.

“Hi.”

“Will?” Mike answers, confusion evident in his voice “Why are you picking up the phone?”

“Wow, thanks Mike. What a way to charm a guy.”

“No- I just meant-”

“I *know* , don’t worry. El will pick up in a minute from her room. In the meantime, I have news.”

“Oh?” Is all Mike says, neither of them saying anything more for a moment. It’s after Will hears Mike exhale that he finally speaks again. “*Hey you*”

*Oh. That’s new.*

And Will feels *warm*.

“*Hi*” he replies, smiling

“*Hi*. So what’s your news?”

“*Really? I go to all this trouble and I’m losing not one, but two or my kids to Wheeler this evening*” Will hears his dad say as El pokes her head into the archway, mouthing ‘*one more minute*’.

And judging by Mike’s groan through the receiver he presumes he’s heard it too.

“He really doesn’t like me does he?”

“Mike he doesn’t *not* like you” Will reassures, “It’s just, and this is related to my news, after all that’s happened today, you probably could have arranged a better day to call El”

*‘Don’t worry, Jonathan won’t be calling Nancy for another hour’* His mom now responds, laughing at his Dad’s groan and Will can’t help but think he’s never going to be able to tell his news.

“Exciting day in the Byers-Hopper household then?”

“Too exciting to share apparently” Will rolls his eyes, as El walks past him, and swiftly into her room, glass of milk in hand. “Look, El will be picking up in a second, so this is going to be *a lot* more rushed than I wanted it to be, but mom’s asked me to give her away at the wedding.”

“I couldn’t imagine anyone else she *would* ask”

“ *Really?*”

“Well, *yeah* . Sometimes I think you’re the only person that doesn’t see how important you are-”

“ *Well, that’s too much of that for one day*”

*El.*

Will groans, “Yeah fine, have your weekly gossip. I’m hanging up now”

“Can you shut my door for me?” El says, sticking her head around the door, a grin on her face.

“Why am I now involved in a three-way call?” Mike mutters to himself

“Sure. *Now*, I’m hanging up though. For real. I’ll talk to you tomorrow Mike”

“Wait, Will-” He hears, as he lowers the phone away from his ear. He brings it back up swiftly.

“Yes?”

“I love you”

Will grins “I love you, too”

And the last thing he hears as he’s placing the phone down is a ‘*You two are so gross*’ from El.

---

“So.” El begins, sitting on her bed, after shoo-ing Will away as he closes her bedroom door. “Why are you late?”

“Look, you lost the on-time privileges after you broke up with me. Now you get the *friend timings* like everyone else.”

“But *why*?”

She hears Mike sigh through the receiver before he mutters “My mom wanted me to help Holly with school work. I got out of there as quick as I could. I didn’t *exactly* plan to be late”

“I’ll let you off this time” she rolls her eyes “But don’t keep me waiting next time” Ignoring Mike’s ‘*I can’t help it, El*’, she continues “So, what’s Dustin been up to this week?”

As it so happened, this week Dustin had made it his goal to be asked out by the head cheerleader using various tactics such as ‘always being at her locker before her free-period’ and ‘leaving little notes at her desk in the advanced physics class they share.’ To no-one's surprise, it hadn't exactly gone to plan.

“Turns out she had a boyfriend who *really* didn't appreciate Dustin's attempts at flirting.” Mike cringes through the phone.

“He didn't do the *sound* did he?”

“I wish I could tell you no.” Mike groans, “But anyway. What's going on in Benton- apart from wedding planning and a dad that hates me?”

She hesitates for a moment, considering her options. Though they had established a ‘*what's said in our rooms, stays in our rooms*’ policy, El was very aware of who she was talking to and how easily said information could be passed on, and *who* it would be passed on to.

So she takes a breath and begins, “This stays in *here* .”

“Ok? Is it serious? Is everyone alright?”

“Yes- I think so? I'm not too sure. Just, this stays in here. Don't tell Will”

Mike snorts, “That's very reminiscent of Christmas. You sure that's a good idea?”

“*Mike.*”

And he pauses, before sighing and simply saying “Ok. It stays in the room.”

“I think Will is mad at me. Has he said anything?”

“El, it's not really fair for me to say if he has-” El bites at her cheek “-

but no. He hasn't"

*But now I don't know if that's true.* She thinks as she shifts to lay down on her bed.

"El. I mean it, he hasn't. But you *really* can't just use me to get information about what Will has or hasn't said"

"Ok." She sighs

"Why do you think he's mad at you anyway? Things seemed pretty alright between you about ten minutes ago" She can hear him move to sit down, cursing under his breath as, she presumes, the wire gets stuck, hearing a slight clattering noise coming from the receiver.

"Because I'm friends with Nick"

"Wait, *Nick* Nick? The cause of a *very* difficult and confusing three months for me, that Nick?"

"What other Nick's do you know?"

"I plan to keep them at a minimum"

She rolls her eyes again, "Yes. That Nick. We were talking after we met at the Diner, with dad. I invited him to sit with us at lunch and I think it annoyed Will that he listened to me over him. Even though he *asked me* to ask him when you were here" She can hear Mike go to speak and quickly interrupts, "No. He's not jealous before you overthink about that. He loves you, he's *so* happy with you- we were talking last week about the future and he said something *gross* about how he can't imagine his without you. He's just finding it a bit weird, I think"

"Really? He said that? I feel the same way" his response is quiet, as if he's talking more to himself than her



“Did you miss the *gross*?”

“Shut up.” He pauses “How are *you* feeling about it?”

“About you and Wi-”

“No- No, not about that. I know you said you think he’s feeling weird about you talking but how are *you* feeling about it all?”

She hums for a moment, considering her response, “I like having him as a friend. We were kind of in a similar position last year”

“Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s ok. I just mean, It’s nice. And I want it to be nice for Will too. For all of us. He wants to be friends with me - and Will too - but I just feel like I’ve been caught between them”

“Can I ask you something?”

“You just did.”

“Ok *Max*. But really, and I know this is way too late to ask at this point, but did you find it weird? With me and Will?”

If El was honest with herself, yes it was. She knows they work so much better as friends, *as boyfriend and girlfriend we never had gossip time*, and she cherished what they had now. But still, though all feelings were gone, it was weird seeing your brother kiss your ex-boyfriend, your brother tell your ex-boyfriend that he loves him and hear him say it back, and then hearing your brother get *the talk* in case he needs it, as that’s something he may *do* , with your ex-boyfriend.

So really, to say it was weird, was a little bit of an understatement.

“It was interesting at first” She settles on telling him

“You’re allowed to say you found it weird El. I know it’s not exactly the most conventional of situations” Mike laughs and El finds herself smiling “I know it’s a little different, but maybe that’s how Will is feeling. I know I’d feel a bit weird if I was in your place. He’ll be fine, it might just take some getting used to”

“But me and you are ok-”

“Exactly. So they will be too.” He pauses for a moment, “Some people just don’t get the privilege of hiding their ex in a fort in their basement for a week for a head start”

It’s El that laughs this time, “Thank you. I am glad with how everything worked out in the end though”

“Me too” He replies, before a small pause “So, any *developments* on what we spoke about, at Spring Break I mean”

“I’m surprised it took you *this* long to ask.”

“I needed to hear this week’s gossip first” El can tell he is grinning on the other end of the phone.

“I hope it didn’t disappoint” she jests before sighing “No developments. He’s blocking me out”

“Blocking you out? Has he been doing it *everyday*? Surely that isn’t good”

El shakes her head “It’s not. We haven’t been practicing, not really. He gives me enough access as if he thinks I won’t notice, but when he has patterns it’s obvious what he’s doing. I just don’t know why he won’t talk about it. He has nightmares most nights”

“Probably not helped by the fact he’s keeping everything in” Mike mutters, “Is there anything you can do to help”

“Not if I can’t feel anything. I just hope that everything is ok. I will say though, if it was anything bad I think I’d know” she attempts to reassure. Before Mike can reply, however, there is a faint *click*

through the phone, signalling someone else had picked up. She thinks for a moment that it might be Will, again, but then she realises it's not on her end.

*"Michael, I need your help upstairs"*

*Oh.*

*How much did she hear?*

"Mom, get off the phone" El hears Mike scream at Karen, despite what sounded like an attempt to cover up the receiver.

El hears a tiny click signalling that they were alone again.

"Sorry" Mike says "I hate that she does that. It's such an invasion of privacy. I have to be so careful sometimes"

El sighs "It's ok. I guess I should let you go"

"Sorry the call got cut short" Mike apologises again

"You'll just have to have some *really* juicy gossip for next week" she smiles

"You got it"

---

**Saturday June 13th, 1987- Benton, Illinois.**

"Hey man" Lucas greets as Will picks up the phone, letting out a small *'hello'*

They talk for a little while, mainly catching up and exchanging pleasantries. As much as his conversations with Mike were the highlight of his days, he really enjoyed talking with his friends. He missed them being so close and he really did take it for granted having his best friends essentially living on his doorstep. He stays silent whilst he listens to Lucas fill him in on everything that was going on in Hawkins, just reveling in being with his friend - even if it couldn't be in person.

"And then Robin told us her homophobic aunt was in town" Lucas says from the other end of the phone

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She came into Family Video upset. Said her mom and her aunt had gotten into a fight. It seemed pretty serious and it left Mike a little shaken"

"Mike did tell me"

"Did he tell you about his mom, too?"

Will sighs "Yeah"

"It must be hard for you guys. I worry you'll encounter someone like Robin's aunt"

"We'll be fine." Will reassures, "We're careful. Besides, if anyone tries anything we have El. Her powers are almost back at this point"

"Not sure I quite agree with you setting your sister on our fellows Americans"

Will snorts, "Why are you worried about this now anyway? Has anyone said anything?"

"Not *exactly* " Lucas responds, "Not really"

*That doesn't sound convincing.*

"You know that Mike has a picture of both of you in his locker right? There's a picture of us as a group as well, but then there's just one of you two"

"Yeah. I have the same one in mine" Will replies, confused as to where Lucas is going with this. He doesn't think a picture in a locker suggests much. It's not like he'd covered it in heart stickers or anything.

"He also *talks*. More than he used to anyway. I'm sure you know that he hangs out with Robin and Steve a lot now- which is *good* and it's nice to see him happy and that he has someone in Hawkins he can talk to that really *gets it*. But the outside world isn't *Family Video* and we just don't want the wrong person to hear"

"Lucas, I'm not- and you *shouldn't*- tell him to stop talking about who he is-"

"I'm *not*. We just don't want to see him get hurt. We don't want to see *either of you* get hurt."

Lucas pauses, taking a breath, "Anyway, I'm looking forward to seeing you - we all are. Just a week with your *friends*. Just like old times. Hey, maybe we could even play D&D. Dustin has been practicing as Dungeon Master with some kids from school."

*A Dustin- made campaign? We've never done that before.*

"Shall I bring my Will the Wise robes then?" Will jests, laughing as he hears Lucas groan on the other end of the phone

"No. *Definitely* not."

---

**Monday June 22nd, 1987- Hawkins, Indiana.**

“Thank you again for letting me stay, Mrs Sinclair” Will says as he steps over the threshold into Lucas’ house “My mom said to give you this - for food and anything else” he drops his duffle bag to the floor, and reaches into his wallet to hand over the three ten dollar bills his mom had given him to pass on.

“Oh don’t be silly” Mrs Sinclair replies, already shaking her head “You keep it, treat yourself to something nice this week with the boys” and she smiles at him “It’s nice to see you, Will. You’re looking good”

“Mom, can you stop accosting my friends?” Lucas complains from the top of the stairs, he makes his way down them two at a time. Mrs. Sinclair rolls her eyes at her son, scolding him for the way he swings on the handrail as he jumps down the final step.

“Hey man” he says, smiling at Will “Greyhound, ok?”

“It was the Greyhound” he shrugs “Nice to have my sister with me this time”

“Did she get to Max’s ok?”

He nods “By the way, Max said to tell you that aside from Wednesday, they’re having ‘*girl time*’ and not to bother them”

Lucas rolls his eyes and Mrs. Sinclair laughs

“It’ll be weird not seeing Max around this week. But I’m glad you boys are getting some quality time, too. Lucas was just saying last week how it’s weird without you”

“It’s always nice to be back” Will smiles at them both

“I’ll leave you boys to it” Mrs. Sinclair says, a comforting hand on

Will's shoulder. She squeezes it softly "Let me know if you need anything this week, Will"

He smiles at her again and she turns, heading toward the kitchen.

"Come on, dude" Lucas prompts "Let's go put your stuff in my room and then we can maybe hit up the arcade."

When they get up to Lucas' room, Will drops his duffle bag on the camp bed that had been set up next to the desk, and promptly sits down next to it.

"Dustin's also been going on about how *unfair* it is that you're staying with me this week, and not him, so I thought maybe we could stop by later" Lucas continues

"Sure, sounds good," Will responds, taking his backpack from his shoulders,. He rummages around it to find his walkie talkie and, once found swiftly tunes into the channel he's looking for. Before he can speak, however, Lucas asks

"What are you doing?"

"Telling Mike I'm here?" He responds, his words sounding like a question. He's confused by the look Lucas is giving him. His friend makes his way across the room, taking the walkie out of Will's hands, and turning it off, closing the antenna.

"No" is all he says

"What do you mean no? Give it back. I told Mike I'd tell him when El and I arrived"

"Dude" Lucas starts "I love you both, but this is *our* week. The rule for this week is *friends only* . So. *I'll* talk to him."

---

“How is this fair?”

Since that day in April, Mike had found *Family Video* had become a place he regularly frequented. Talking to Robin served as a form of comfort he wasn't even aware he needed. His friends were *great*, of course they were but it wasn't quite the same as talking with someone that *understood*.

So, if every Tuesday after school and Saturday morning Mike happened to be *unreachable* by his friends, that was ok by him.

The conversations started small at first, Mike finding himself reluctant to reveal too much though as the weeks, and months progressed and a slip up of a *certain four letter word* in regards to a discussion about his parents (which did not go unnoticed by Robin), Mike began to wonder why he was reluctant to open up to her in the first place.

So naturally, after a multitude of hushed conversations with Robin that seemed to die down *oh so mysteriously* whenever Steve came within earshot, it was only a matter of time before he found out everything about Mike.

“He's just as much *my* friend as he is Lucas and Dustin's. Not even letting Will call me to say that he and El arrived safe, that's *bullshit*”

“I think you're being a little over the top here Wheeler” Robin leans against the counter, pencil in hand, a smirk on her face “They just want to spend some time with him-“

“And, I can't even meet up with El because Max and El are having *girl time*. So, what? I can't see *any* of my friends this week?”

“Yeah ok, it's unfair, whatever- some of us have a *job* to do,” Steve interrupts from the Action/Adventure section of the store, placing the VHS cases on the shelf “Besides, Henderson came in the other night shouting about you all going to the lake on Friday, and then your cabin trip on Saturday ”

“Well, yeah but that's not the point. The point *is* that I don't know



why I'm being punished”

“Punished is a *strong* word, my friend” Robin interjects, gesturing with her pencil

“Punished is the *right* word” Mike mutters, leaning his back against the counter, absentmindedly playing with Steve’s makeshift Tip sign reading ‘*HERE’S A TIP: GIVE US SOME*’ “I understand. *Kinda* . They don’t see him as much as I do, I mean, I get frustrated because when I do see him it’s not for very long. But can they *really* say that cutting me out is the right thing?”

“You know what you need to do?” Steve clicks the fingers of his freehand at him from across the shop, “Make a *grand gesture* .”

Mike frowns, “A *grand gesture* ? I don’t need to make any kind of *gesture* . Were you even listening? I’ve got the guy, it’s the friends that are the problem, and besides, I’m definitely not taking advice on that sort of thing from *you* ”

“Oh, he has got you there, *video boy*” Robin clicks her tongue, tapping Mike’s shoulder with her pencil a couple of times and Mike finds her can’t help but smile

“*Video boy*- what are you-” Steve mutters before changing his position arms on hips, “This team up?” He vaguely gestures between Mike and Robin before continuing, “ *Not a fan*”

A customer walks in, breaking up the conversation and Mike busies himself in the Sci-Fi section- as Robin had pointed out on his last visit, his, *apparent*, ‘go to’ . Ever since Steve had found out, he’d been trying *in his own way* to give him advice, though most of it, Mike thought, entirely irrelevant. He picks up a VHS case, ‘*The Fly*’ .

*Well if that doesn’t bring up memories* he thinks, remembering back to that day last Christmas- the day they were dealing with the aftermath of Hopper being found alive , Will’s *ill-fated* date, the argument that evening. But he also remembers their talk on the Byers’ couch where he very much told Will how he felt about him without saying those

words.

*“You’re glowing and you’re radiant and you’re you.  
You’re so you, Will Byers”*

He cringes for a moment, placing the VHS case against his forehead and screwing his eyes together. It’s not what he said, it’s something he definitely still thinks more and more by the day, but more the situation he said it in. But he supposes if anything could be considered a *grand gesture* it would probably be that.

*Why do I even care about Steve Harrington’s advice anyway?* He thinks as he places the case back on the shelf, looking over his shoulder to see if the customer had left yet. *No.* He walks a little further along the selection, now selecting *Invaders from Mars*, immediately turning the case over to look at the back. Alien spacecraft, invasions, mind control, Mike considers just for a moment that really, none of this seems overly far-fetched anymore.

The subject of the film is a young boy. *Definitely not far-fetched then.*

*A grand gesture might not be the worst idea* he can’t believe he considers *Might make them realise what crap this ‘friends only’ rule is.*

*Or do the complete opposite.*

He realises he was right; Steve’s plan was ridiculous after all.

Mike hears a *“Thanks for stopping by!”* before the familiar chime of the *Family Video* doorbell sounds as the door opens and closes once again.

*“Finally ,* thought he’d never leave” Steve groans as Mike places the case down, turning back to face them both, “You know, this is the fourth time he’s been in this week? Always after the same crappy *Star*

*Wars* knock off.”

“*Star Trek* isn’t a *Star Wars* knock off, dingus” Robin throws a screwed up receipt at his head, which he catches before it can hit.

“Well, it *could* be”

“It *definitely* couldn’t”

And Mike snorts, making his way back to the counter where Robin was now sorting the cash register. He hadn’t put much thought into it before but seeing Steve and Robin together like this, he was really glad they had each other. They balanced each other so completely that sometimes he felt a little like an intruder into a group they’d invited him in themselves.

But he supposed, at least these friends wouldn’t *cut him off* for some stupid ‘*friends only*’ rule.

“It’s true though, right?” Mike says again, watching through the glass as the customer gets into their car.

“That *Star Trek* couldn’t be a-”

“What? No- no. It’s true that cutting me out is such *bull-*”

“Really? This again?” Steve mutters, running a hand down his face, “You’re *going* to the lake and cabin with them. That’s not being cut out in my book” Steve adds again, picking up the crate of VHS tapes and moving along to the next aisle.

“Ok, yeah I *get* it I’m being dramatic” Mike crosses his arms with a huff “All I’m saying is, as a Party, we stick together, and that includes allowing members of said Party to spend time with their boyfriend.” he pauses for a moment before adding “Or *girlfriend, actually*. You know, I don’t complain when Lucas and Max want to spend time alone-”

“Yeah, see, I got you there i’m afraid. You came in last Saturday complaining about the fact that Lucas gets a free house for the night

and he's *conveniently* busy"

Mike was ever more starting to regret letting Steve in on *The Know*.

He hadn't actually decided if he'd wanted to tell Steve or not when he'd found out. Mike had come to visit Robin at work yet again - *maybe we should hang out outside of Family Video, one day*, he thinks - and Steve had finally caved and wanted to know what their '*secret chats*' were about. He'd assumed, at first, Mike was coming to ask Robin about *girl* advice, to which he and Robin had burst out laughing, causing Steve to frown and demand to know why then it was that Mike kept disrupting their shifts.

Mike and Robin had shared a look, and he'd given her a small nod.

"Steve" She'd said *"Think about it"*

*"Think about what?"*

*"Why would Mike, come to me , of all people, for advice"*

*His eyes widened "Are you-?" he trailed off, gesturing at Mike*

*"Kind of? I still like girls, too. But yeah" He'd paused "Will is my boyfriend now"*

*"Byers?"*

*Mike nodded*

*"Oh" Steve had said "Definitely not a girl, then"*

*" Definitely not" Mike had agreed*

*"What is it with you Wheeler's wanting to date the Byers? Is there something in the water at your house? Other families exist you know"*

Mike had rolled his eyes, Steve had gone back to stacking shelves, and every time Mike had visited since, he'd offered some piece of ridiculous advice.

"What's your point?" Mike frowns at him

"My point is you can't complain about being put *on the bench* when you don't like it yourself"

"What? "

"Ok, look" Robin interjects "As much as I *hate* to agree with *high school analogies* over here," ("What does that even mean?" Steve murmurs ) "Let them have their moment. You're going there for three weeks on Sunday, right?"

"Three weeks?" Steve sets out the case in his hand before walking back to the counter "How did you even score that?"

"Mom and Dad don't *exactly* know the purpose of the trip. Just as they have no idea that Will and El are here in Hawkins this week"

"Sneaking around and lying to the parents, *nice*"

"We're not *sneaking*. Not exactly. Mrs Byers knows what's going on-well, she does *now* anyway."

"Oh ok, so it's just the *sneaking around* then" Steve mocks, picking up an elastic band that was laying on the counter and flicking it at Mike. He sees it coming and dodges it with a "*Ha!*".

*Really regretting letting him in on The Know.*

"Hey Mike, while you're here, want to help me count the stock we

have in back? Anything to make the shift go by quicker” Robin asks, popping herself on the top of the counter so she could swing her legs over to the other side. She jumps off, and walks backwards towards the store room, waiting on an answer from Mike.

Mike shrugs, “Sure, I’ve got nothing else to do today” and he follows her in.

They’re quiet for a little while, the only words spoken between them being film names, numbers and ‘*pass me the stock gun?*’

However, it’s when she reaches up to one of the higher shelves, to pull down the box of promo cards for the next big release that Mike notices something on her wrist.

“Where did you get that?”

“Going to need to be a bit clearer with the *that*, my friend”

“Your bracelet,” he points down to her wrist, “I like it”

“Yeah?” She gives him a curious look “You want one?”

“No- Well, not a bracelet, but maybe *something*. Two, *some things*”

“You’re going to have to be a bit more specific than that”

“I don’t know” he shrugs “Where did you even get it?”

“Near Indianapolis. I can give you the name of the store-”

“No. No” He’s quick to tell her. Just the thought of going there and buying something *himself* already making him panic “Could you get it for me?”

“You still haven’t told me what it is”

“What do they have?”

She sits on a nearby stool, resting her chin on the palm of her hand. "It's really cool in the city. I mean it's not perfect, far from it, actually, but it's better than *here*. There's a small shop I found, just with little tokens and trinkets. The owner is older and a lesbian, and she was really cool with answering some questions. She says that despite the laws, and attitudes of people, things *are* getting better slowly. She gave me this bracelet free of charge; said it was nice to see part of the younger generation being proud to be who they are. She had badges, and shoelaces, patches, even t-shirts, if you can believe it. The flag was everywhere. It felt nice"

"It sounds *amazing*"

"Maybe we could go together sometime? When you're ready to, that is" she reassures him

"Maybe" he agrees "But for now, do you think you could pick up two of those badges for me?"

"Two pride badges coming up" she grins "Luckily for you, I'm heading up to the city in a few days with my mom. She wants to have a '*girls shopping day*' " she rolls her eyes

"Thanks" he says, smiling back, pulling down the box he had distracted Robin from retrieving earlier ("*You know you're not getting paid for doing this, right?*" *She jests*)

They're quiet again for a moment, Mike thinking over Robin's words, one particular point being his focus. He glances over to her, a few times before finally asking.

"The lady in the shop, you said she was cool with answering questions right? Could you ask- or would she know, if there's anything that represents me, I mean? You know, liking boys and girls"

She smiles at him, and it's so sincere it takes him off guard. She pats her knees before standing up from the stool.

"Sure thing"

He grins.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading! You can follow us both on  
tumblr [@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)



## 6. Gonna give you all my love, boy

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Ok, I think we’re all missing the most important thing here.” Lucas cuts in, standing just in front of Dustin, as if to break up the inevitable incoming argument. “Are we just going to ignore Casanova over here with the ‘Hey you’?”

### Notes for the Chapter:

It's here- as we've said before, this serves as a second part for Chapter 5, so it can be read straight through if you need a little catch up.

It's a long one, but there some plot strings that we're starting to get into here so it may be best to keep an eye out...

We hope you enjoy!

### Monday 22nd June 1987. Hawkins, Indiana.

Will and Lucas had left for the arcade a couple of hours after he'd arrived. Mike had been - understandably - annoyed with Lucas' *'friends only'* plan, and had spent a good ten minutes cursing him out (with Will shouting his agreement, to let Mike know he definitely was not in on this) and by the time they'd hung up - or rather, Lucas turned off the walkie - Mrs. Sinclair called them for a late lunch.

So it was only now, a little after 4pm, that they finally pull up outside the arcade, Will borrowing Lucas' old bike for the week as means of a quicker way to get around Hawkins.

Will is just getting off the bike when he hears a door chime and a familiar voice say *'See you guys, later'*

He looks up to see his boyfriend step out of the *Family Video* entrance. He smiles and Lucas looks at him, frowning "Will, what are

you-? Oh *great* ” he mutters, when he finally notices Mike across the way. On hearing Lucas’ voice, Mike turns to face them both.

“Oh, look. It’s two people that *apparently* I’m not friends with” Mike calls out, folding his arms across his chest. Lucas rolls his eyes, placing his bike on the bike rack outside of *The Palace*.

“Mike, come on-”

“Come on? *Come on?* I don’t know Lucas, it would just have been nice to have had a warning that over 10 years of friendship meant nothing”

“That’s dramatic” Lucas mutters just so Will can hear him. He rolls his eyes, thinking that maybe he agrees with Mike instead.

Lucas finishes up locking his bike, Will not far behind, and they make a move to stand near Mike, who still hadn’t moved from his position outside *Family Video*. Will looks past Mike for a moment to see Steve and Robin, though still working, paying a little too close attention to what was going on outside. He gives an awkward wave, they wave back, and then he pulls his focus back to his friends

“What are you even doing here? ” Lucas asks with a sigh

“Just hanging out with my *real* friends. Is that ok with you or also *against the rules* ?” he turns to look specifically at Will, then, and his tone changes completely when he smiles and says “Hi, Will”

Will grins back “Hi, Mike”

“See, this is what I mean, you’re just *coupley*-”

“You’re *making* it *coupley*” Mike retorts “I said ‘*Hi, Will*’. I didn’t realise greeting someone was romantic”

“It’s the way you said it-”

“I call *bull* on that. Where is this even coming from? None of you had a problem with spending time with me and El”

*I guess that’s what Lucas meant on the phone when he said Mike talks*

There’s not many people out and about at this time of day but Will is still surprised Mike didn’t look around before he spoke. Of *course* it makes him happy but he’s also aware that Hawkins isn’t the most progressive of places- it only takes one person to have a problem with this, with *them*, and so much becomes at risk.

“ *Will* did.” Lucas responds, pulling Will out of his thoughts.

“Please don’t get me involved.” he murmurs, glancing at Lucas before looking down at the ground

“We know *why* Will had a problem with that-” he gives Will a reassuring glance “So unless you or Dustin have some *feelings* to confess, I don’t see what the problem is”

He also didn’t see what the problem was, not really. Lucas’ explanation hadn’t exactly been the most logical if Will was being honest; they *were* all friends, still *are* all friends, regardless as to whether some of those friends were a *little bit more*. But, he also understood his point. Since New Year, he and Mike did hang out more than the whole of The Party did together. Sure, Mike saw them at school, but Will (and El by default) didn’t really see Lucas and Dustin unless they were in Hawkins for an extended stay which didn’t happen too often.

He just wasn't sure if *this* was the right way about doing it.

"Mike, I'm not saying you can't hang out with us, we just want to spend some time with Will, we *never* really get to see him" Lucas tries to reason

"Ok, so I can hang out with you when Will isn't there? That's *you* out for the week then. Max and El are also having *girl time*, so can I see Dustin? Do I have your permission?"

"*Come on* , man we don't mean it like that"

"Once again, I am not included in the *we*" Will reiterates

"Ok, Lucas, does that mean I can come to the arcade with you right now?"

"*Yes*" Will says before he can stop himself, but he means it. Even though he talks to Mike most evenings on the phone, it's never the same as actually seeing him and with all the *excitement* of the day, and Lucas' *plan* , he'd resigned himself to having to wait a few more days. But now Mike was here, in front of him, he realises just how much he had missed him, and how much he doesn't want him to leave.

"Well-"

"*Got it* . Might see you on Friday then, unless I find out I'm not *allowed* at the lake either" Mike walks over to where his bike was locked up and begins to unchain it. Lucas rolls his eyes in exasperation before saying "Of course you're allowed at the lake"

Once his bike is free, he walks it so he is standing directly in front of Will. Paying Lucas no mind, and he reaches out to give Will's hand a quick squeeze, before dropping it soon after.

"I've missed you" he says softly, his tone completely changes from how it was before "I'm looking forward to the end of this week"

Will smiles "And three weeks after that"

“And three weeks after that” Mike agrees, grinning back. The softness in his face and tone remain there for a little longer, but when he glances back at Lucas, it switches to how it was before “I would say I’d talk to you later but apparently that’s not allowed. I’ll see you soon, Will” he says and with that, he gives one last glare at Lucas, and one more smile at Will before he gets onto his bike and starts to peddle away. Will calls out a goodbye, before turning back to Lucas who has a look on his face that Will can’t quite figure out.

“Dude” he starts “What’s wrong?”

“What? Oh. Nothing” Lucas sighs, staring as Mike rides away “Ok, come on, let’s go get some new highscores”

“You should’ve let him stay” Will says, as they make their way into the arcade

“That would’ve gone against my entire point”

“You can’t just blow him off though, Lucas” Will frowns “He’s our friend-”

“He’s not *just* your friend” Lucas says as he heads over to *Dig Dug*. He starts putting in quarters and the machine comes to life.

“Yes, but we *are* friends. It’s not as though we’re going to make out in front of you all every time we hang out, besides, we don’t complain about you and Max”

“Me and Max are different. It’s different-” Will opens his mouth to argue, but Lucas holds his hand up to stop him from interrupting “I just mean, we don’t have as many *restrictions* as you do ”

Will frowns “Thanks Lucas. I’ve only been here a couple of hours and I’m feeling so welcome already”

“I didn’t mean it like *that*. It’s just- I still mean what I said on the phone, you saw what he was like out there”

“Yeah, we do still need to be careful, but if he feels comfortable, that’s great. He’s not doing anything I don’t like- nothing that I wouldn’t think of doing”

“I just *worry*.” Lucas sighs, “A nd look, I know the *friends only* rule seems a bit extreme but before the girls got here, it was always just *us four* . That’s changed now, and it’s not just that you’re both in relationships, it’s that you’re in a relationship with *each other*. It’s different” Lucas frantically moves the joystick left and right, finding himself in an awkward position in game. He presses at the button as the enemies draw closer and curses as he’s caught. He adds another quarter, before starting again

“Why didn’t you say any of this before? - *quick, turn left* - It seemed like you were all trying to get us together, and I know that Mike has asked you multiple times if you’re ok with it”

“We are ok with it. We *are* happy for you. Really we are. And we can see how happy you both are, too. It’s just-your relationship is quite *serious* and I guess it was a little unexpected”

*And you don’t think you and Max are?* Will rolls his eyes

“Thanks for the vote of confidence” he replies dryly “Were you all hoping we’d break up after a month?”

“ *No*. Of course not. It’s just, I’ve known you both since we were six and now you’re all in love and it’s *weird*” he sighs

“Weird.”

His tone makes Lucas look away from the machine and he dies yet again. This time he steps aside, gesturing at the console so Will can have a turn. It’s when Will doesn’t move that Lucas speaks again.

“Not like *that*. It’s just been a big change”

“Well sorry my relationship makes you so uncomfortable” Will

mutters, finally putting a quarter into the machine. The game starts up once again and Will grabs the joystick, moving his character around the screen

“Will, I’ve said it *doesn’t*- I’ve already explained. Look, we genuinely just wanted to spend time with you. We miss spending time with Will and Mike- our friends, rather than Will and Mike- *The Couple*”

“But you’re *not* spending time with *our friends* because one of them isn’t allowed to be here”

"Ok" Lucas sighs "Maybe I came across a little strong"

“Maybe?” Will raises an eyebrow

“Ok. I’m sorry for acting like such a douchebag. I’ll apologise to Mike, too” he pauses “I still want friend time, though”

“Fine” Will sighs, watching as his character is caught. He points out that he got a higher score than Lucas, receiving an eye roll in response. “Come on” he adds “ *Space Ace* is free. Let’s see if I can score higher than you on that one, too”

---

“Well, look who *finally* decided to show up”

Dustin greets them at his front door, arms tightly crossed, dish cloth in hand, and Will can’t help but think he may be emulating Steve Harrington a *little* too much.

“What took you guys so long? 5:30pm you said you’d be here, *5:30pm*. It’s now *6:15pm*. Anything could have happened”

“Dustin. *Chill-*”

“ *And* I tried to call Mike with a *Code Red* only to have him tell me,

and I quote, *'leave me alone I'm busy'* in return so no, *Lucas*, I will not chill”

Lucas rolls his eyes “Dude, just let us in already. You’ve been moaning about how it’s unfair that Will gets to stay with me for the week, instead of you. You’re losing your own precious *Will Time* here.”

With a *huff*, he moves out of the way, outstretching his hand giving them access into the house. It had been a while since he’d been to the Henderson household, The Party hang outs, at least since his departure from Hawkins, were largely isolated to Mike’s basement and the new addition of *Family Video* so being here, in Dustin’s home was a pleasant change. He’d missed it here, Claudia Henderson’s eccentric style bursting with personality- nothing matched, the patterns displayed on the walls clashed with the furniture, but it felt *right*.

Dustin leads them to his room, promptly shoos Tews off of his bed and shutting the door as the cat leaves.

“Gentlemen” he gestures for them to sit, taking a seat at his desk whilst Lucas and Will head for his bed “I was going to suggest that we go to *The Hawk* and catch a movie but since you’ve kept me waiting forever-”

“We were *forty five minutes* late-“

“It’s the *principle* of things” Dustin interrupts Lucas, gesturing as he speaks “Anyway, happy to hang out here William? I can promise a fun evening of comics and *NES*- I’ve got *Mario* ?”

“I can hang out here” Will smiles, shrugging his shoulders

They play for a while, with small disagreements about who was Player One and Player Two and who would watch for the round, both Will and Lucas dreading when it was Dustin’s turn to observe as his hints as to how to pass certain elements of the levels were *very* unhelpful.



It's when the console is turned off and they're sitting reading through the latest issue of *The Amazing Spiderman* Dustin has *apparently* picked up '*Just for Will's visit*' that Will finds himself a little more subdued, the distraction of the game no longer there to mute his thoughts. Lucas' words in the arcade were playing on his mind, as well as their interaction with Mike outside of *Family Video* - *not to mention Lucas' face as Mike rode away.*

So it's when Dustin asks if anyone wants a drink that Will finally says

"Are you *all* uncomfortable?"

Lucas and Dustin look at one another before looking back to Will

"I mean, I am *pretty* thirsty. That's why I asked if-"

"No, not with that. Are you all uncomfortable with me and Mike?"

"Will, I told you-"

"I want you to be honest with me. Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"Not uncomfortable, per se-" Dustin starts "Just-" Lucas nudges him in the ribs

"Uncomfortable" Will finishes for him

"No, I didn't say that. It's more - Lucas help me out here?"

"I've already said my bit and I said I'll apologise to Mike. He was *not* happy when we saw him at *Family Video* , man"

"What was he doing at *Family Video*?" On Will's glare, Dustin holds his hands up in defense "Ok, *not* the point. The point is that we're not uncomfortable. We just have concerns for the both of you. Your welfare. Keeping your private lives, *private*- "

"Do you and Lucas just spend all your time conspiring against us

then?-"

" Ok." Lucas interjects "It's like I said at the arcade, it's not that we thought you'd break up, it's just that you've gotten so serious so fast. The way Mike talks about you, the way you talk about him, and the way you are when you're together, it's so different to how you were before. It's even different to how Mike was with El- I don't think he was ever *this* serious about her and they were together *two years*" he pauses, thinking over his next words "It's just different. When we were kids I never would've thought you two would be together. It's taking some getting used to - seeing you as a couple rather than just our friends"

"We *are* your friends. That comes first, always" Will reassures him "We've never wanted that to change- at least not intentionally"

"I dunno Will, not sure I needed to be told, on Valentine's Day, that you're *hotter than Phoebe Cates*" Dustin adds, giving a theatrical shudder.

"*Really?* Did he *really* say that? " Will asks, feeling his face flush. The thought causes a warm feeling to settle in his chest.

" *This*, right here, this? *This* is what I mean"

"Well how do you expect me to react? He's my *boyfriend*."

"And that's *cool* . It is " Lucas reassures, patting Will on the shoulder

"Ok," Will sighs, "But no more stupid rules, *and* you need to apologise to Mike"

"Deal" Lucas agrees, giving Dustin a look when he doesn't immediately respond

"Fine. Deal" Dustin concedes, holding out his hand for Will to shake. Will lets out a small laugh before taking his hand and shaking it mockingly

"Can we talk about something else now?" Will asks "Like how I'm clearly the superior player when it comes to *Mario* "

“You didn’t score *much* higher than us” Dustin scoffs

“Oh, care for a rematch, then?” Will asks, eyebrow raised “The one who survives the longest gets an ice cream bought for them at the lake”

“You’re on, Byers”

---

### **Thursday 25th June 1987. Hawkins, Indiana.**

It’s his third night in Hawkins when he wakes with gasp. He’d been lucky to avoid a nightmare so far this week, but it seemed his luck had finally run out. His first thought is to check himself, grounding him back into reality. He taps at his face, then his arms, then takes a deep breath and exhales.

His next thought is to make sure he didn’t owe the Sinclair family any money for a new lightbulb. He looks up at the ceiling, *nothing smashed*, before looking to Lucas’ table lamp, *nothing broken there*, either. As he glances toward the table, he notices the clock showing 4:22am.

He takes another breath, exhales, and pushes himself out of the camp bed. His blankets were starting to make him feel claustrophobic and he felt like he needed to *get out*. He grabs his backpack, carefully exiting the room, making sure not to wake Lucas as he slowly closes the door. He makes his way to the living room and once there, immediately rummages through his backpack to find his walkie talkie. For a moment, he debates calling El- she *had* been annoying him about what was going on for a while now, maybe this was the time to finally come clean. He also wouldn’t be surprised if she had some semblance of an idea as to what was going on.

*After all, creepy sibling connection.*

But did he really want to deal with that right now? He didn't want to cause unnecessary panic - though this certainly felt far from unnecessary at this point - especially being back in Hawkins. El would also want to tell his dad, who would of course tell his mom and the thought of this being escalated further before they'd tried to deal with this themselves, wasn't something he wanted to do.

And there was no way that Max would let her come over to Lucas' on her own.

So really, there was only one option, and one that, if Will was being honest, was the option he was *always* going to choose. He tunes into the channel, holds down the button, and hopes for a response.

"Mike, are you there? Over" Will whispers with a shaky voice. He lets go of the button on the walkie, and paces around the Sinclair's living room as he waits for Mike's reply. When he doesn't receive one within five minutes, he tries again, voice a little louder this time "Mike? Are you there?"

He hears a groggy "Will? Is that you? Are you ok?" from the other end and he sighs with relief. He presses the button so he can speak again and lets out a "Can we talk?"

He hears muffled shuffling before a "Sure, what do you want to talk about?"

"No. Can we *talk*? Meet me in Lucas' backyard?"

There's a brief pause before "Give me five minutes" and the walkie clicks off.

A few moments later, after shrugging on his jacket and shoes, Will finds himself pacing on the Sinclair's back porch. He can hear cicadas, and the birds twittering in the trees. The sun is coming up and light is slowly creeping in over the grass and despite the early

morning breeze, Will can tell it's going to be another warm day. He feels a little better already, being in the fresh air, but he knows he's not going to feel completely right until "Will?"

Mike's voice comes from behind him. Will stops his pacing, and turns to face Mike. He doesn't move from where he is standing and Mike quickly walks over to him, and places his hands on either side of Will's face.

"What happened? What's wrong?"

And Will *breaks* under the weight of the dream.

He falls into Mike's arms, wrapping his own around his neck. He nestles his face into his shoulder, and Mike slowly brings his arms around Will's waist.

"Hey" he soothes "What's going on?"

He doesn't answer, pulling Mike in closer, allowing himself a selfish moment of self-indulgence. He exhales, grounding himself; feeling the breeze on his face, the slightly scratching feeling of Mike's sweater, the arms at his waist. He finally pulls away

"I had another one- I should have told you at Spring Break what they were about but-"

"Hey, *no* , you didn't have to tell me anything-"

"They've been about the Mind Flayer"

"Oh."

"But it was different, this time. He was in Benton. It's like he found me" he keeps his voice quiet, as if the Mind Flayer was listening in.

Mike hears him, though, and his eyes widen, expression disconcerted. He looks like he's searching for the right thing to say, but before he can speak again they hear a voice from the back door.

“Look, I know I said I was sorry but I draw the line at you using my backyard as a hookup spot”

“Not the time” Mike hisses, but he doesn’t move either of them from their position.

Lucas holds up his hands in surrender “I know, but you two owe me an explanation”

“We don’t owe you sh-”

Will stops him before he can continue “Mike, it’s ok” he reassures, before shifting so he can see Lucas “I had a nightmare”

“And that was cause for Mike to break into my backyard at 5am?”

He and Mike exchange a look before Mike sighs stating “You might want to sit down”

---

“So wait,” Lucas says, he’d stood up from the Sinclair’s garden bench midway through Will’s explanation, and had been pacing ever since “How long has this been happening?”

“The dreams? A few months. Dreams like this? Last night.” Will pauses for a moment, absent mindedness tapping against his thighs “They’re more of a *feeling*, kind of like in Summer. Like a memory-”

“A memory?” Lucas questions with a frown, “So, they’re just things you’ve seen before?”

“Yeah, well apart from last night. I’m *always* in Hawkins, never at home in Illinois, so I don’t understand *why*” Will rests his head against his hands, closing his eyes for a moment.

“Does El know? If something’s up I mean. She hasn’t said anything?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest, I’ve been trying to block her out most of the time” he looks back up at Lucas. “I know it was wrong, but until last night I didn’t think she really needed to know-”

“Maybe we should call her” Mike overlaps, “What you feel she feels, right? So she’d know then, if something is trying to find a way in again.”

“I don’t think anything is trying to get back through” Will gives Mike a curious look, “I don’t feel anything when I’m awake. I haven’t really for two years- well apart from El’s feelings but that’s different, it feels different. It’s only when I’m asleep”

“Like Freddie Krueger” Lucas clicks his fingers at them

“What? Lucas, this is nothing like Freddie Krueger. This isn’t some Wes Craven horror movie” Mike frowns, crossing his arms against his chest

“It *sounds* like Freddie Krueger. What would the Mind Flayer gain through going through Will’s dreams? *Nothing*. You said you’re not feeling it when you’re awake right?”

Will shakes his head, frowning.

“So it’s probably just a dream. My dad gets them from his time back in ‘nam, and that’s *years* later. This is probably like that.”

“You weren’t *there* Lucas. When I was with Will for Spring Break, the lights were going crazy, his light bulb *burst* ”

“*Again*, could still be like my dad’s. Will’s... *powers* whatever, are at least a little linked with how he’s feeling right? So it makes sense that if his dream is taking him back *there* , emotions are going to be higher right?”

Will isn’t convinced but he doesn’t voice it. His emotions during, and after, the nightmares are so strong, he can’t bring himself to believe the answer is that simple. Lucas, clearly noticing the frown on his face, continues.

“Look, it’s 5am- we can’t do anything now. El is *definitely* still asleep so we can’t talk to her until later and the lack of sleep can’t be helping you much either. Let’s just go back inside, make some coffee and just *relax*”

*I don’t think the coffee is going to help with the lack of sleep.*

But, he supposes Lucas is right. They *can’t* do anything now and he wouldn’t know what to do even if they could. So, with a nod, he stands from the bench.

It’s when Mike stands to follow them into the house that Lucas asks “Dude, what are you doing?”

“Coming inside for coffee?” Mike replies, but his tone makes it sound like a question

“No. I meant me and Will. *You* need to go home”

“Oh don’t start *this* again” Mike rolls his eyes “Besides, I’m not leaving him, not when he’s like this. I wouldn’t leave *you* if you were like that”

“If my parents wake up and find you in the house, they’re going to want answers that we can’t give them”

“He has a point” Will adds

“Will-”

He takes hold of Mike’s hands, giving them a squeeze “I’ll be ok” he reassures him “Aren’t you supposed to be babysitting Holly today anyway?”

“I can bring her along, I’ll find a way to keep her quiet”

“Doesn’t sound *great*” Lucas mutters, causing Will to snort



“That’s a big risk, Mike”

“I’d do it if you need me. If you need me today, I’ll go home and tell them right now”

He squeezes Mike’s hands again “We’ve spoken about this. Not until you’re ready, and not a moment before”

Mike squeezes back “Are you *sure*? ”

“Positive” and he leans up to give Mike a quick peck, ignoring Lucas’ groan

“Now, you better get home before your parents wake up and find you missing”

Mike is the one who kisses Will quickly this time, before letting go of his hands and stepping away “You’ll tell me if you need anything today?”

“Yes” Will smiles “But I promise I’ll be fine”

*Besides, there’s something I want to do alone today.*

---

“Wow.” he mutters to himself

He’s kneeling on the ground, He didn’t expect to see much left, it *had* been two years after all, but Will supposed that what was strange was he hadn’t expected to see so little of it. Nobody had ever really passed through *Mirkwood* anyway, but he felt a sense of discomfort that anyone wandering through the forest would have no idea that this area once served as a place of comfort, his safe space.

*I guess I really did a good job with this one.*

He feels at the ground and moves around the twigs that gave some semblance of the structure that had once proudly stood in the space.

*It really is gone.*

He hears a rustling of leaves from behind him and he *freezes* , thinking back to the last time he was here- what he *felt* the last time he was here. Hesitantly, he turns round, seeing Lucas, bike in hand, wearing a concerned expression. He places his bike against a nearby tree and walks over to Will, kneeling beside him in the dirt. “We tried to save little parts of it after you left. I- well, Mike and Dustin were with me too- came here to see if there was anything that we could give you but-”

“It was just wood. Wood and twigs, that’s all it ever was”

“Hey, *no.* ” He feels an arm around his shoulder, and turns to see Lucas frowning at his words, “It *meant* something to you, man. That doesn’t sound like *just wood and twigs* to me”

He turns his attention back to the ground as Lucas squeezes his shoulder, picking up a nearby stick and using it to move some of the sodden leaves near what once was the entrance.

“*Radagast*” he absent mindlessly mutters drawing a line in the mud. He can feel Lucas staring at him and feels a little self conscious, shaking him off “It’s stupid” He throws the stick away, “I don’t know what I wanted really. It’s just *weird*”

“It’s not stupid-”

“ Yes. It is. It is *stupid*. Wanting closure for myself for something I did two years ago and yet i’m here, wondering about whether or not there’s bits of the photos I ripped up still buried underneath all of this” he gestures to the forest floor “And the stupidest thing of all is that despite all of that, despite the wondering about what’s underneath all the dirt, despite that fact that people won’t know what happened here in our world *and* The Upside Down, I *don’t* regret tearing it down. Not anymore.”

He wipes his hands on his jeans before rubbing at his eyes, shaking his head, beginning to stand “I’m sorry. Let’s just go.”

“Will, there’s no rush.” Lucas replies “Really, you don’t need to apologise.”

“ *Two years*. So much has happened since I did it. I feel like there’s a strange kind of significance to that.” He faces Lucas, crossing his arms into his chest “Not even just that summer but everything. *Everything* changed. Not just for me either, I don’t think any of us are who we were before”

“Are you saying that *Castle Byers* is the reason that you moved to *Middle of Nowhere, Illinois*”

He pushes him with a snort “No, of course not I just mean- I don’t know, I think what I’m trying to say is maybe it *was* time.”

“Will, if it was or wasn’t time we still shouldn’t have made you do that-”

“You didn’t *make* me do anything. You and Mike didn’t come out here, hand me a baseball bat and say ‘*tear it down*’. I decided to do that- sure, there was a *push* but you didn’t do it.”

“Still man, I can’t speak for Mike but I know I still think about it”

He looks back one more time “I just- I just thought I’d feel *more*”

“It’s ok that you don’t. You know that, right? Feelings are weird. Sometimes they change because *we* change, and that’s ok. It doesn’t mean it meant any less before”

And with that Lucas pulls him into a hug which Will reciprocates, wrapping his arms around Lucas' shoulders.

"How did you know I was here?" Will mumbles into his shirt

"I just had a feeling. We were always able to find you here"

Will smiles.

---

### **Friday 26th June 1987. Hawkins, Indiana.**

Despite the warm temperature and the events of the day before, Will found that sleep came easier last night. A nightmare hadn't happened, to both his and Lucas' delight, so both boys found themselves feeling refreshed when they woke up that morning.

"Thanks for not giving me the 5am wake up call this morning, man" Lucas had said, stretching before getting out of his bed

"It's not like I pick and choose when they're going to happen" Will frowned, nestling himself in his own covers on the camp bed a little further

Lucas walked over to where Will was situated, pulling off the comforter, "Come on, out. Let's get breakfast. Places to go, people to see, some of which *really* won't be happy if we're late."

"And who's fault would that be if he's annoyed this morning after your *friends only plan* - which I still don't understand because we are-*you are*, friends." Will said, pushing himself out of the camp bed, and making his way to his duffle bag

"I was talking about Dustin since he moaned on Monday but sure."

But now, they found themselves, beach towels in hand at the Sinclair's front door, listening to Lucas' mom remind them about ' *Lake Safety*' and Will can't help but feel it's more directed at him after the events of 1983. He nods, Lucas nods and they both agree to ' *not swim out of their depth. Not on each other's watch.*' With one final " *Mom, we'll be fine*" from Lucas they open the front door and walk a little up the road, to a nearby birch tree and wait.

"I really don't know why you and Mike didn't just tell his mom you were staying here for the week" Lucas says, looking up the street

"Well, we thought she wouldn't have let him come for three weeks if she knew I was here" Will shrugs

"I dunno Will, It just feels like you've both made this way more complicated than it needed to be"

He considers Lucas' words for a moment, biting his lip "I guess. But we also really didn't want to deal with the question of why Mike wanted to spend *four weeks* with *me* "

"And how do *you* feel? About that, I mean?"

He bites at his cheek "It would be nice, not to hide. But not all parents are as cool as mine are. Even my dad- biological dad I mean, was *awful* about people like us. He used to call me names all the time. I think if he and my mom were still together, I probably wouldn't have come out, so I get it. I get why he hasn't said anything, and I'm- I'm ok with that. I'm not going to rush him."

*And I really am* , he thinks to himself. He knows that Mr and Mrs Wheeler are very *particular* with their opinions, especially after what Mike had said he'd overheard his mom say back in April. Plus, Mike hadn't even been out to himself for a year, and Will knows how much it was for *himself* to process. Mike had the addition of having a girlfriend at the same time, and he knew it had been a huge mental struggle. He wonders sometimes if Mike is *still* processing - not that

it's a problem if he is, but Will knows added pressure isn't going to help. He only wants Mike to come out when he feels safe, comfortable and completely *sure*.

He hears Lucas drop his bag to the floor and Will feels a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and he turns to him, giving him a smile.

"It must be hard. I'm sorry that none of us were there to support you. We can't have helped much this week either"

"No, It's ok. I had El- and Jonathan obviously. When I told you all on the phone, you were all really great too, so you were there for me. As for this week, I'll just call it *a terrible mistake*. Think Mike might feel differently though"

Lucas rolls his eyes before turning more serious once again "Still though, it can't be easy"

"No, but he's worth it"

Lucas wrinkles his nose "*Gross*"

Will laughs, nudging Lucas in the ribs "You can blame my soppy feelings on you. I miss him"

"You saw him *yesterday*" Lucas rolls his eyes

"Whilst I was *panicking*. It wasn't exactly *romantic*"

They laugh again and Will can't help but feel that despite everything, it has been nice being with his friends this week. He'd missed this.

"What's so funny?"

They turn back towards the cul-de-sac to see Mike standing with a frown on his face, carrying a towel under his arm and a swim bag on

his right shoulder.

“You’re *late*” Lucas states picks up his own bag and towel once again

“Well sorry that I have a seven year old sister to make breakfast for. Mom had an early aerobics class, *again*. ”

“Don’t you have a dad? *And* a sister who could help?”

“Apparently not. Dad was too busy with the paper and Nancy had to get ready for work, so all down to *me* . *Again*”

Mike sighs before his eyes flicker over towards Will, a smile spreading across his face. Will smiles too, mouthing a ‘hi’ at his boyfriend. Mike’s smile grows.

Lucas doesn’t notice, still ranting about Mike’s sour attitude “You’re not going to be like this *all day* are you?”

Still smiling, and not taking his eyes off Will, Mike says “Ah, I think I’ll be ok”

*I really have missed him*, Will thinks. He knows it’s ridiculous because Lucas is right, he just saw him *yesterday* , but he’s looking forward to getting to spend the whole day together, and tomorrow at the cabin, too.

And then *three whole weeks*.

“ *Ok, let’s go.*” Lucas pulls at Mike’s arm, starting to walk down the street “Max and El are probably already at the lake and we *need* to get there before Dustin after the way he reacted the other night”

---

“Why?”

“Good morning to you too, El” Will rolls his eyes as the group walk over to a rather frustrated El, Max and Dustin. The lake looks relatively empty. Ever since the pool had been refurbished and reopened a few years ago, no one tended to visit the lakes and quarry in the summer anymore. It meant those that did, were awarded a fair amount of privacy.

“Don’t blame us,” Lucas sighs, “ *Someone* had brotherly duties to take care of-”

“Why are you saying that like I’m lying?” Mike mutters from beside Will.

“Two days this week, Lucas. *Two. Days.*” Dustin complains as they begin to walk towards the bank, looking for a shaded spot. “How do you think this makes me feel?”

“Neither times were *my fault*”

“Oh my God, can you two stop arguing like an old married couple for just *one day* ?” Max asks them, rolling her eyes as she sets down her towel.”So, are you going to set your towel down next to mine or would you rather be with *Dustin*?”

“Shut up, Max” Dustin retorts, setting his own towel down in his own spot a little to the left of where Max was. El joins him, murmuring to Max about how she hadn’t caught up with him in a while. Max gives her a smile, before turning back to glare at Lucas expectedly.

“Of course I’m going to sit with you” Lucas reassures Max, as he unrolls his towel. *Unnecessarily*, Will thinks. He knows Max knew he wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

“Oh, I’m sorry, what’s this?” Mike starts, gesturing between Lucas and Max, “I thought it was *friends only* this week”



“Mike is in *a mood*” Lucas, mumbles to Max who smirks in return

“ No. No I’m not. I’m just making an observation. So come on Will, let’s go and put your towel down next to your old *friend* Mike” and Mike takes hold of his hand leading him to the left of Dustin and El; a little further away from The Party.

“Sorry I had to babysit yesterday, I didn’t want to leave you like that”

“No, it’s ok. Besides, you know Lucas wouldn’t have let you join in even if you didn’t have to look after Holly”

“This *friends only* thing was such *bullshit*. I just don’t get it. I’m friends with them just as much as you are. What did cutting me off actually do- apart from cause me to run off to *Family Video* and get bad advice from *Steve Harrington*?”

Will reaches over and squeezes Mike’s hand “You listened to advice from *Steve*? ”

“Nevermind” Mike says, a bit *too* quickly, as he squeezes back “What did you do yesterday?”

Will wonders how to breach the subject. It’s not that he didn’t want to talk to Mike about it, but he still felt *weird* after his visit to Castle Byers - well, the twigs that remained. He hadn’t quite processed his own feelings, and he kind of wanted to make sense of them first. He knew Mike would want to talk, and he’d want to help, but he didn’t know if he was completely ready for that yet.

“I-” Will looks over to Mike, biting at his cheek, “I wanted some time on my own for a bit- and I *was* on my own, until Lucas found me. There was something I needed to do-” He trails off

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. Really Will, it’s ok”

Will hears Dustin groan, and he looks over to see him standing desperately trying to remove coke from his shirt, El still sitting next to an overflowing coke can, laughing.

“He’s such a moron” Mike laughs from next to him, catching Will’s attention once more. As Will turns back to face him, he gives a small smile “Really, Will, It’s ok. We don’t have to talk about it. I can tell you all about my very exciting day of babysitting my seven year old sister, instead”

Will smiles slightly before taking a breath “I just-” He pauses “I just wanted to see it. *Castle Byers* . One more time.”

“Oh”

There’s a pause, just for a moment as Mike shuffles a little closer

“How are you feeling?”

“ *Weird*” Will sighs “ *Really* weird”

“Was it too much, going back?”

“It was *nothing*. I felt *nothing*” He sighs again, gesturing with his hands “That’s why I feel so weird”

He feels an arm snake around his shoulders, pulling him in a little closer

“Is this ok?” Mike asks

“You really don’t need to ask that”

“I know, but as your platonic friend for the week, I thought it was best to make sure”

Will laughs, leaning in closer again and resting his head on Mike’s shoulder

“It’s ok, you know? Mike tells him “That it feels weird. It’s *bound* to

be. But you can take as much time as you need until it doesn't" Mike gives his shoulder a reassuring squeeze "I'll still be here, no matter how long that is"

He had known he probably had nothing to worry about by telling Mike, but nonetheless, he *had* been nervous. He should've realised that Mike would allow him to take all of this at his own pace, and he feels so much more comfort at the thought. He wraps his arm across Mike, hugging into him.

"Thank you" he murmurs. Mike rests his chin on the top of Will's head.

They're both silent for a little while, content to enjoy each other's company, and watch the water. It's only when they hear commotion from their friends again, that Mike pulls away slightly and they both look to their left.

"So" Dustin shouts across to them all as he stands up from his towel. He reaches out a hand to help El up, too "Who's up for a game of chicken?"

---

The game of chicken is as successful as anyone could've expected, and that is that it *wasn't*. Max and Lucas had paired off immediately, as had Dustin and El ( "*El and Will cannot be on the same team, they'll just cheat*" ) leaving Mike and Will to negotiate who would be where

"You should be on my shoulders" Mike had said, crouching down in the water

"Mike, we're pretty much the same height" Will rolled his eyes

“I’m an inch taller so stop complaining and hurry up”

Lucas and Max had won in the end. El *had* cheated, but everyone had caught on pretty quickly, and disqualified her and Dustin

“I didn’t have anything to do with it” Dustin had protested

“You told me to try and make Mike fall” El had argued, wiping at her bloody nose

“Traitor” He could only mumble in return

They’d taken the role of referee after their disqualification, and whilst Will and Mike had put up a good fight, Max was relentless and had eventually gotten the upper hand and had caused Will to fall.

As Lucas and Max *continued* to win, the amusement wore off pretty quickly so when El had suggested a game she had played in Swim class, The Party found themselves agreeing that maybe it was time to change the game.

And that was how Will found himself, in the middle of the lake, shivering ever so slightly, shouting ‘*Polo*’ in response to Mike’s half hearted ‘*Marco*’

“Come *on* Mike, put some effort into it” Max shouts from near the bank

“I just don’t understand - *Marco* - why *I’m* the one that’s searching first?”

He sees Dustin cross his arms, from across the lake as Mike

uncomfortably tugs at his t-shirt turned blindfold.

“Because - *Polo* - Will and El would find a way to cheat, again, *and* you lost-” Dustin adds, leaning backwards, floating onto his back.

“ *You were disqualified.* ”

“You didn’t say *Marco - Polo*”

“Oh for god’s sake” Mike grumbles, wading through the water, getting closer to Dustin “ *Marco?* ”

“ *Polo* ” Will shouts again, followed by the rest of The Party. He notices the moment Mike realises he’s close to Dustin, but doesn’t miss how his head turns toward him after hearing his shout. Dustin pushes himself back onto his feet, a frown evident on his face before he looks over to Will who gives him a shrug and sheepish grin in return.

And if Will allows himself to move a little closer to Mike, as he shouts *Marco* once again, no-one mentions it.

“Mike, you’re missing the point of the game” Dustin groans

“You didn’t say *Polo*”

“Isn’t the point that he *doesn’t* catch us anyway? - *Polo* -” Will shuffles *just* a little closer again, raising his voice and missing the look Dustin gives him as he does so.

It doesn’t take long for everyone, Will included, to catch on to the idea that Mike had absolutely no intentions of finding anyone else but Will during the game- Max taking herself back to the bank and sitting down, arms folded.

“ *And*, there you are” Mike grins, taking a hold of the top of Will’s arm, finally catching him. But it’s *different* , and it lingers, his fingers tapping ever so slightly on his arm, before Will notices Mike biting at his lip, as if contemplating what to do next.

“Mike? Are you ok?”

And then it *shifts*

“Got you” Mike murmurs, wrapping his arms low around Will’s waist, pulling him in closer.

Will’s eyes widen and he reaches up to lift the blindfold from Mike’s eyes, pushing it up onto his forehead. He opens his eyes, looking down into Will’s own.

“Now, what would you have done if that wasn't me” Will retorts, eyebrow raised and a smile on his face “Not sure everyone else would’ve appreciated *this* greeting” he aims for a casual tone, trying not to let anyone know how Mike’s actions were making him feel. They were relatively alone at the lake, but even then it was *rare* that Mike engaged in *affection* in public. Maybe Lucas was right, that it really *was* starting to change.

And he *likes* it.

He likes the relief of not worrying, of casual touches in public that *should* be considered normal but that he knows aren’t by so many people. He hesitates for a moment before taking his hands away from the blindfold interlocking them at the back of Mike’s neck. Mike pulls him in closer again, until there is no space left between them. Neither of them look away from the other.

“As long as you do?” Mike asks, an eyebrow raised

Will nods, smiling at him

“Then let’s not think about everyone else” Mike says softly, and with that he leans down, pressing his lips against Will’s.

Will freezes for a split second, instincts kicking in. *We’re in public, someone might see, Mike’s parents don’t know* , but after the initial surprise, and realising Mike didn’t *want* to let him go, he melts into the kiss. Any worries he’d had earlier in the day, that week, diminishing the more he becomes wrapped up in the moment, in

*Mike*. Because right here, right now, they're the *only* two people and Will finds the thought *freeing*. For the first time in a while, his mind feels void of anything but joy and love but also, now there's a *want*.

Close isn't close enough and he finds himself shifting in the water, his hands making their way up into Mike's hair- and he feels Mike give a breathy laugh on their ascent.

He hears noise, *maybe the water*, but he's too distracted to make out anything in particular.

And he finds he *doesn't care*.

It seems Mike doesn't either, as he deepens the kiss, lifting Will's feet slightly off of the silt and clay at the bottom of the lake, taking him slightly by surprise once again. After being interrupted by his dad during Spring Break, most of their kisses had been chaste. So this was still pretty new and yet, felt so familiar and he allows himself for one self-indulgent moment to consider that *this* was made *just* for him.

Mike pulls away briefly, though staying close

"Hey, you" he says, voice low "Is this ok?"

And there *that* is again. Shivering- but not because of the cold- Will stays silent, instead pulling Mike back down to meet his lips once more.

He's not sure how long they stay there, it could've been seconds, it could've been minutes, it could've been *hours*, but all Will was aware of, all he was *sure* of, was *Mike*.

Until it all *literally* comes crashing down as they're both hit by a wave of water.

They jump apart, Will loses his footing on the clay before he finds Mike's shoulders, steadying himself. They both turn toward The Party, who were now much nearer than they had realised- a series of expressions displayed on their faces, ranging from frustration to some degree of disgust- and see El wiping her nose with her hand.

"What the hell was that for?" Mike splutters, pushing his hair out of his eyes

"*What the hell was that for?*" Lucas mimics in a childish voice "What do you think it was for, dipshit?"

"When we decided on a day at the lake we didn't realise we were signing up for a private show" Max says, rolling her eyes. She'd obviously swam back to them from the bank at some point.

"Why do you think Dad hates him?" El chimes in, nonchalant

"*This* was none of your business" Mike stresses

"You made it our business when you did it in *front of us* " Dustin retorts

"No one asked you to *look*, Dustin"

"Oh come on, what's wrong with you? *Anyone* could have been around. *Anyone* could have seen" Dustin continues on, gesturing with his hands

"Yeah but they *weren't* and they *didn't*" Will feels Mike wrap an arm around his waist, pulling him in close "There's no one here but us"

"But they *could* have Mike. That's the point. I don't *get* you. You talk about secrecy, you keep Will and El's week here a secret, and then you go and pull a stunt like that? Are you an *idiot?* "

Will feels Mike's hand tense on his waist.

"*Ok, I think* we're all missing the most important thing here." Lucas cuts in, standing just in front of Dustin, as if to break up the



inevitable incoming argument. “Are we just going to ignore Casanova over here with the ‘*Hey you*’” and he wades a little closer to Max, waggling his eyebrows at her before turning back to Mike.

Mike flips him off. Lucas grins.

“Come on, *you*” Max says, dramatically pointing at Lucas “Let’s go sunbathe. I don’t want to play games anymore, I need to try and get that image out of my head, instead”

And they make their way out of water, leaving both Will and Mike alone. There’s a look that he can’t quite decipher on Mike’s face as he watches their friends exit onto the bank, Dustin still groaning about *the scene* to Lucas whilst Max, *thankfully* he thinks, gently chides them to “*give it a rest already*”

“Hey,” Will pokes Mike in the arm, who turns to face him, frowning, “You ok?”

“First, *ouch*,” Mike begins, rubbing at his shoulder (“*It didn’t hurt that much Mike.*”) “But yeah, I’m ok. Just- you know what, it doesn’t matter. Race you back to the bank? Loser doesn’t get the window seat on the greyhound on Sunday?”

And Will already makes a start before shouting back, “You *really* shouldn’t make bets on things you *know* you’re going to lose”

---

Mike arrives home around six that evening after making a quick stop into *Family Video*. Robin had got back from her trip to the city yesterday and he knew she had a Friday night shift so he thought he’d swing by to pick up what he’d asked her to buy for him and Will. The store was busier than usual, being a Friday during summer vacation but Robin has been alone at the back, stocking shelves. She’d greeted him with a small ‘*Hey, dingus*’ and before receiving a reply, she reached into her pocket, pulling out two small rainbow pin badges and had dropped them into his palm.

“Thank you” He’d said “Did you speak to that lady? Did she say if they have anything- you know, for people like me?”

“Just the one flag so far, but maybe one day that will change” she’d said, smiling reassuringly

He’d kept his hands on the badges the whole way home, thumbing them around in his pocket. They feel *heavy*, but he can’t take his hands off them, nor can he stop thinking about what this means- how significant it feels to have a token to represent *who he is*. His mind is still racing as he steps through the front door and into the kitchen, greeting his mom who is setting the dinner table. She has little to say to him, which Mike finds unusual; he’s used to more of a conversation. But instead she settles on a *‘how are Dustin and Lucas?’* and on hearing that they were ok, leaves him with a *‘dinner will be ten minutes.’* It’s safe to say her attitude doesn’t make him feel *great*, Dustin’s words from earlier also playing on his mind a little. He’s on edge until his mom calls them all to the table, Mike taking a seat next to Holly, and she finally speaks.

“We saw Lonnie Byers in town today” She says casually, taking a sip of her wine “He’s moving back to Hawkins”

Her comment is more than enough to derail his thoughts onto a different track. Mike had always been aware that Lonnie wasn’t the *nicest* of guys, even when he was six years old and hugging a crying Will because his dad was leaving, or when he was ten and hugging a sad Will because his dad hadn’t shown up for a visit, or when he’d see Will flinch everytime someone called him a *queer* because he knew he was remembering all the times his dad had called him the same thing. So yeah, he’d always known Lonnie wasn’t great, but the older he got, the more open Will became about the mental and the *‘It was only occasional, Mike. Mom and Jonathan always tried to stop him ’* physical abuse he’d faced, Mike had realised that Lonnie Byers was nothing more than a pathetic excuse of a human being, and just thinking of him causes his anger to rise. He stabs at a piece of

broccoli.

“Did he not get the memo that no one wants him here?” he asks, rolling his eyes

“Michael” his dad scolds “Don’t be rude”

“I’m not being rude” he defends “I’m *right*. He’s a piece of shit-”

“*Language!*”

“And I don’t know why he thinks anybody would want to see him again”

“Well he does” his mom says “We spoke. He asked if we knew where Joyce was. Said he went to the house and was surprised to see someone else living there. Did she not tell him? I’m surprised she’d try and keep him from seeing his kids”

“Did you tell him where they are?” Mike demands “Mom-”

“I just said they’d moved to Illinois” His mom shrugs, and Mike lets out a small exhale “Your dad mentioned Benton”

Mike drops his fork, and it clatters loudly on his plate - Holly picking it up and giving it back to him.

“Mom, there’s a reason they didn’t tell him. He’s *awful* to them. He hasn’t called them *once* since we found Will alive. He doesn’t care. He probably only wants to talk to Joyce because he wants money, but he can forget it. They’re all finally happy. Joyce is engaged and-”

“Joyce is *engaged?!?*” His mom lowers her glass, eyebrow raised

*Oops.*

“Um-” He says nothing more than that, looking between his mom and dad at the table before picking up another piece of broccoli with his

fork

“Who is Joyce engaged to?” His mom asks, “How has she had the time to meet someone and get engaged?”

“Can I go to the wedding?” Holly excitedly pulls at Mike’s sleeve, her voice in stark contrast to Karen’s own.

“They’ve been living in Benton for nearly two years” Mike mutters before taking Holly’s hand away from his shirt, giving it a small squeeze and smiling at her.

*Besides it's not so much how she personally had the time. It's more when would he be brought back home from Russia alive.*

“ Mike, who-”

“Mom, I’m not going to tell you about *Joyce’s love life* so you can gossip about her on the phone to Jill ”

“I *don’t* gossip”

His dad, mid mouthful of a piece of chicken, gives a snort but tries to cover it with a cough and Mike can’t help but smirk slightly. His mom looks over to glare at his dad, letting out a ‘*Ted*’ between gritted teeth. Mike sighs.

“Look, they’ve just got engaged, they’re not telling anyone right now. I shouldn’t have said anything really”

“So then how do you know?”

“What?”

“If they’re not saying anything, then why do you know?” she raises an eyebrow

*Shit.*

“Well, Will told me” he mutters, cutting up a potato.

“Will, huh?” She mumbles, taking another sip of her wine before continuing, “You know, I saw Jane in town yesterday. You didn’t say she was visiting”

“I didn’t know she was. But sometimes she comes for the day to see Max” He says quickly, taking a drink from his own glass, “We’re not together mom, she doesn’t have to tell me what she’s doing and when she’s doing it”

“ *Mike*, you can tell me if you are- or if there’s anything going on-”

“Mom, we’re not together anymore. I’m not dating Jane, before you even *ask* , I’m not dating Max. I’m not seeing *any girls*. I promise. ”

She holds his gaze for a moment before taking one more sip of wine and simply saying “You know where I am if you need to talk”

The rest of dinner is finished in an uncomfortable silence.

---

## **Saturday 27th June 1987. Hawkins, Indiana.**

The atmosphere is different from the day previous when he meets Lucas and Will, suitcase in hand, at the birch tree a little way down Maple Street that afternoon. He says goodbye to his mom, promises he’ll call her when he gets to Benton - telling her he won’t cause too much trouble - and leaves. He smiles at Lucas, then at Will and they make a start on the *long* walk to what once was Hopper’s cabin.

The conversation on the journey there isn’t the *most* interesting, more

small talk than anything and he can tell Will knows something is up, if the occasional glances he would give him were *any* indication.

Surprisingly, it's Lucas that says "You're unusually quiet," Will nodding in agreement.

"I'm fine."

"No you're not"

"*Lucas*. Really, I'm just tired."

Lucas mumbles a "*Well, ok*" before walking ahead. Will glances at him again, this time Mike catching his gaze and mouthing a simple '*Later*'. Will gives him a reassuring smile and they both hurry to catch up with Lucas.

Unexpectedly they're the first to arrive this time, Max and El arriving shortly after and Dustin running in, out of breath, fifteen minutes later, with Lucas simply saying "Well, well, well. How the tables have turned."

"*You* were late twice. How is the comparable? I'm within my *rights* to be a little late"

"I'm sorry, within your *rights*?-"

"-And besides, fifteen minutes is *very* different to forty five"

Hopper's old cabin, with a *little bit* of renovation, had become almost a hangout spot for them all. After he'd '*died*', Joyce had thought it would be a good idea to fix up the cabin *again* and keep it as a place they could all stay when they visited Hawkins (saving Joyce on motel money). She hadn't said it out loud, but Mike suspected that she'd been so insistent that they save the cabin as a memory for El, and so she could somewhat keep her first real home.

That wasn't to say it looked exactly like how they all remembered it

from those two years ago. The cabin has truly been made *theirs*, each member of The Party adding their own addition to the walls and rooms - Max making shelves out of her old, broken skateboards, Dustin using comic book pages instead of wallpaper, Lucas supplying movies fitting each each of their personalities ("*Now you've got no excuse but to watch some actual good movies, Dustin*"), El bringing a new board game on each visit to Hawkins and Mike, himself, simply providing a journal with the idea that whenever they stayed at the cabin they could all add a new entry.

Will however, took a different approach and, if and Mike was being honest, was his *favourite* part. In what was once the living room of the cabin, on the back wall Will had created a mural simply entitled '*The Party*' in a mixture of mediums, ranging from paintings to photographs. It had taken him a whole day to complete it, The Party banned from the cabin until it was finished and, on each visit, they took it amongst themselves to add more photos (and the occasional new drawing from Will.) He was modest about it, but you could tell that Will was proud of his creation, and the rest of them were too.

Mike looks at the mural for a moment before pulling his attention back to his friends. He does feel a little better being around them all, though things still feel slightly awkward from the day before- the conversation with his mom also still playing on his mind a little. This only increases when Lucas asks an hour later who's going with him to get some snacks from Big Buy.

"You all go," Will suggests, "We'll stay here-"

"Yeah, absolutely not" Dustin interrupts, "After *that* yesterday, who knows what we'll walk back in on"

"Real mature, Dustin" Mike rolls his eyes.

"No, I think Will's right. We should all go, these guys can hold down the fort" Lucas interjects, herding them all outside, Dustin still complaining under his breath. Mike notices Will mouth a 'thank you' to Lucas, who nods in return, causing El and Max to give them both a look, before closing the door behind them.

"Ok, what's wrong?" Will faces him on the couch, putting his feet up

and crossing his legs, “Everyone’s gone, it’s just me and it’s *technically* later”

Mike chuckles, though it’s subdued. He shuffles next to Will and wraps an arm around his shoulders. He feels Will nestle into his chest and he reaches for Mike’s free hand, interlocking their fingers.

“There’s just *a lot* going on in my mind right now”

“Does any of it have to do with yesterday?”

“More like *all of it*”

“Oh.”

There's a slight pause.

Will tenses “Do you- do you regret it? What happened at the lake”

“What? No, *no*. Well, I regret maybe taking Steve’s advice on making a grand gesture, and that I did it in front of all of our friends but no. *Definitely not*”

“That was what Steve’s advice was? The ‘ *bad advice from Steve Harrington*’ you ran to *Family Video* for?”

“I didn’t *run* to him for advice, he gave it to me whilst I was there, completely unsolicited”

“You still took it though”

“You didn’t exactly complain” Mike rolls his eyes before smirking at Will, who nudges him.

“Well, no.” he admits after a moment, and then pauses, clearly thinking. “But you know we can never tell Steve that, right?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Mike says sarcastically, “We won’t have to. You really think Dustin is going to keep quiet? Judging by his reaction



yesterday, Steve probably already knows”

Will groans, before they both share a chuckle “So, that’s one problem solved then. What’s the next one?”

“Not too far from the first issue”

“Lucas and Dustin then?”

“We have a winner.”

He sighs and lets go of Will’s hand and pulls him in closer, resting his chin on the top of his head.

“First of all, *friends only* week? *Bullshit*. If I said to everyone ‘Hey everyone, Max can’t hang out with us this week because it’s for *friends only*’ no-one would go along with it, Max *definitely* wouldn’t. Neither would Lucas. This rule wasn’t in place for El, so why should it be now. It makes more sense *not* being in place now because we’re all friends anyway” Mike sighs again, Will making an attempt to look up at him “I know they apologised but it just feels targeted somehow. And that’s not even mentioning Dustin’s reaction at the lake”

“In fairness, I don’t know if I would have liked it if it were you and El- and not just because I’d be jealous. I don’t think I would have liked it if it were anyone. It was pretty *intense*” Will looking up again, giving him a sheepish smile

“I’m sorry” Mike grimaces

“No, it’s ok. I can’t exactly say anything because I was one half of the equation. It was great, for me, *for us*, just- well I know what it’s like to be on the other side of it.” Will pauses again “I guess you wouldn’t know though, having dated one third of The Party now”

Mike nudges him playfully “It’ll be more than one third if you don’t shut up-” but he’s also grinning as he says it, and Will clearly doesn’t mind as he rests back against Mike’s chest.

“I do know what you mean, though” Will sighs, as if considering his next words, “I dunno, maybe they’re trying to help in their own way. Lucas did call me before I came back, saying you looked shaken up

that day you told me about- you know, with Robin. I guess it could be their attempt to help-”

*Some help they’ve been.*

“-but I don’t know how telling me we’re ‘*quite serious*’ and that it’s ‘*unexpected*’ is helping with anything”

“They said *what?*”

Will shifts out of his arms, turning round to face him on the couch

“What do they mean *unexpected* ? Did they just expect me to get bored and dump you after a week?”

“My boyfriend: *The Charmer* ” Will responds, resting his chin on his palm of his hands

He wasn’t exactly sure where Lucas and Dustin had got *that* idea from, especially taking into consideration how hesitant they both were about going forward with their relationship in the first place - and how much the two of them, and Max, had encouraged Mike to stop being ridiculous and just go for it.

“Do you think we’re *quite serious* ?” He asks Will, furrowing his eyebrows

“I don’t know” Will mumbles, shifting his eyes, “I haven’t really thought about it-”

“Oh. Well El said, and I quote, you said something gross about how

you can't imagine your life without me"

Will turns *red*. "El is a traitor. What I *meant* was, when I think of the future, after high school and everything, I can't see you not there"

"So *exactly* what El said then." Mike grins. "I like that you've thought about it, though. I have too"

"Good" Will smiles softly, pausing for a moment before, "Well, I heard *you* think that I'm *hotter than Phoebe Cates*"

*Dustin.*

He groans, remembering back to Valentines Day, in his basement, eating way too many of Holly's cookies and playing *way too many* games of Uno. It's not that he's embarrassed per se, after all, he *did* mean it. It's more that he never considered this would come up in conversation again, especially with the subject mentioned involved.

"What *actually* happened was that Dustin was complaining that Suzie dumped him and said that she was *hotter than Phoebe Cates* and I said she's no *you*"

"*Exactly* what Dustin said then." It's Will that grins this time and Mike rolls his eyes, "So, I am? Hotter than Phoebe Cates?"

"Don't let it get to your head" Mike lightly pushes him, before "But yeah. I think you are"

Will beams at him and Mike can't help but feel Will won't let him forget that any time soon. Though, through all the jests, they still haven't addressed the question at hand, Mike realises. So he takes a moment and breaches the subject again

“Do you? Think we’re *serious*, I mean?”

He notices Will scan his face, almost before looking for any signs of hesitation, before finally nodding.

“Yes. But I’d say that’s a good thing. Unless, *you* don’t think it’s a good thing”

“I think that, too. Definitely good. *Definitely* a good thing”

“That’s a lot of *definitely*, Mike”

“That’s because, Will, I’m *definitely* serious about *you*”

“*Smooth*” Will rolls his eyes, but then there’s a change, Will faltering slightly as he bites at the corner of his lip “Actually, while we’re on the subject on things that Lucas and Dustin have said, I did kind of want to talk about something”

Mike frowns, meeting Will’s gaze

“I didn’t really expect you to do that, at the lake I mean, it was *bold*”

“Does bold mean *bad*? ”

“*No* , no, we’ve already established the moment itself was definitely fine by me.” Will pauses for a moment, Mike noticing his face reddens and he can’t help but laugh a little. “I just mean- it’s more- you’ve gotten a lot more confident since Spring Break, which is *great* and I love this and I love that we have these moments together but-” Will sighs, “I felt you tense a bit, when Dustin said about secrecy”

“Weirdly, this was my next concern. It kind of mixes with my final one too”

Will takes his hands once again, playing with his fingers and Mike

can't help but smile at the small action

"Mike, I don't want to be a secret as much as I'm sure you don't but I don't want a moment like that, a moment that's *ours*, to be the reason we're not a secret anymore. It sucks, it really does and I want to be able to walk through Hawkins, holding your hand, showing the world who we are, but what I want *more* is you to feel safe and comfortable and, like I said on Wednesday, like *you're* ready. I don't need Steve Harrington's grand gestures. The little moments like *this* , moments when it's just us means just as much"

He's reminded of the small badges in his pocket and for a moment he considers giving it to Will now.

*It wouldn't take much.* He thinks. *Just take it out and give him one, that's all you need to do.*

But he can't, finding he stops himself before he even begins to make a move.

"Really Mike, I mean that," Will's words bring Mike out of his thoughts, "I can't say that enough I don't think"

He considered that maybe he had been a little *relaxed* recently, thought if he was honest, he wasn't actually sure of when that change happened for him- he couldn't say it was something he was consciously aware of. But until Dustin's words, until his mom's words, the implications hadn't sunk in. It was a *risk*, the more he thought about it, but then, he had meant what he'd told Dustin at the lake; no-one was around. No-one saw anything. At this point, himself and Will had been together for half a year, that's half a year of *sneaking around* , but, moreso, half a year of doing it *successfully*. But, he's not stupid and Will's words of a not wanting a moment that's *theirs* to be the reason they're not a secret anymore hit him hard. He knows it only takes the wrong person to see them, and say

something, and they're in trouble and *that* had been playing on his mind from the moment he left the lake.

"I had been thinking of that." Mike tells him, "Especially when I got home. I wasn't exactly thinking about other people when we were at the lake, it was very in the moment"

Will rolls his eyes before his expression turns more serious "What do you mean, when you got home?"

"My mom is questioning things more- not about us, I don't think she has any idea anyway- but she saw El in town, with Max. Asked why I didn't say anything, and then did her whole '*you can talk to me*' thing again. It just kind of put things into perspective I guess. Maybe Dustin was right, all this crap about keeping everything on the down low and I nearly blow it because I've been getting too confident." Mike rubs at his eyes before continuing "I meant it though, what I said. If you wanted me to, I'd tell them. I'd call them right now and do it."

"Then that wouldn't be for you, it would be for me. *Don't* do it just for me"

But Mike isn't entirely sure now if it would be completely for Will. He's starting to think he might be ready soon to do it for *himself*.

"So, your mom asked about El?" Will speaks again after a moment

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure she thinks we're dating again"

"Oh? Why?" Will frowns

"She thinks she's in town because she was visiting me, she overheard us on the phone a few weeks ago and I may have accidentally told her your mom is engaged-

"What?"

“Yeah she told me Lonnie has moved back and-”

“What?”

“She wondered why I was allowed in on the family gossip.” He shrugs sheepishly

“Ok.” Will stands, clasping his hands together “Ok, let’s start at the beginning. What did your mom overhear on the phone?”

“I don’t know,” Mike says. He *did* know, but now was not the time to get into *that* conversation he had with El during Spring Break. “Something about how she can’t feel it but that she thinks everything is ok and she’d know if something was wrong” He rushes slightly, hoping Will won’t pick up *all* the details

“Ok,” Will says again, “So, your mom most likely thinks El is pregnant. More importantly, did she speak to Lonnie?”

*My mom thinks El is what?*

That isn’t what he’d expected Will to say. But, now looking back at the way his mom was acting, the way she’d said he could tell her if ‘*anything was going on*’ and the looks she had been giving him, it suddenly made sense. She couldn’t be further from the truth, but he doesn’t know how he can tell her that without making her then think about what really was going on. If he lets himself admit it, he *is* a little relieved that her behaviour hadn’t been because she knew about him and Will. When that *does* happen, he wants it to be on his own terms.

Despite this, however, there is a small part of him that feels a stab of hurt that she clearly hadn’t even considered the reality of the situation. The fact that his mom jumped to thinking that he’d gotten his ex-girlfriend *pregnant* , but not wondered why he was suddenly talking about, talking to and constantly visiting *Will* , only confirmed to him that *who is he* isn’t even something that crosses her mind.

The thought makes him feel worse about telling his parents.

“But that doesn’t even make sense. She knows I talk to *you*. She knows I’m visiting *you* . She picks up the phone one of the few times I call to talk to El and now I’m giving her grandkids?”

“Yeah, well in her mind, and everyone else’s, it’s probably easier to understand” Will rolls his eyes, a bitter tone in his voice. There’s something else there too, something Mike hadn’t quite figured out. He makes a note to ask him about it later.

“I *hate* it” Mike bites

“Yeah. Me too. But on that note, what’s that about Lonnie?”

“My mom and dad saw him, he told them he was moving back to Hawkins and asked after you all. Mom say you’d moved to Illinois-”

“Ok, Illinois is a big state so that’s not *too* bad”

*Well.*

Mike rubs his neck nervously, “But my dad *did* mention Benton.”

And Will *grimaces* . Mike notices that the lights in the cabin flicker, and he doesn’t think it’s a coincidence.

“Really, I’m sorry. The one time my dad *actually* listens and speaks up and it’s something like this”

The lights flicker again and Will sits back down on the couch with a sigh. He places his head in his hands.

“It’s not your fault” he says eventually “And my mom isn’t alone this time at least. I just hate that he thinks he can do this, that he comes



around only when he wants something and doesn't care the rest of the time. I hate how he makes her feel"

Mike moves to put his arm around Will's shoulder, pulling him in slightly

"It's not *fair*" Will continues "We were fine. Mom was *fine*. I know that she doesn't love him anymore, but the way that he makes her feel just makes me so *angry* . He has no right to come back into our lives, not after everything, not after he didn't even check in *once*, after Mom told him I was alive" Mike can feel Will shaking, and he pulls him in closer in an attempt to comfort.

"He doesn't deserve you. Any of you" Mike says vehemently, rubbing Will's arm softly.

"Damn right he doesn't. Who treats their family like this? Who calls their kids the things he calls me? He *hurt* my mom. He made Jonathan kill that rabbit. Does he think any of us want him there? What is he expecting to find by coming back, to see that everything is the same, we're all the same. Mom is still *mom*, Jonathan is still *Jonathan*, and I'm still his *failed second chance* at a better son- but to be honest, second best seems to be all I'm good for recently. What would he think now- seeing that I turned out exactly how he said I would. That I'm just a f-"

" *No* " Mike interrupts sharply, Will's words and the frantic flickering of the lights causing his concern to grow. Will stops, surprised at Mike's tone, and Mike takes that moment to shift off the couch, kneeling in front of Will. He places his hands on Will's shoulders, and waits until Will meets his eyes.

"*No you're not*" he speaks again "You're not *that*. You're not any of the things he called you-"

"Yes I am"

"No. You're *you* . Being gay isn't a bad thing, and it *isn't* any of the bad words people use to describe it. It's just who you are- and I know from personal experience that who you are is a pretty amazing thing. The way you own it, the way you are with yourself, it made me feel

like I could be like that with myself, too”

“I don’t know about *‘pretty amazing’*” Will mutters

“It’s lucky I do know a bit about that then, huh?” He replies, Will giving somewhat of a semblance of a smile.

“I *do* know it’s not bad” Will says quietly after a while “It’s just that sometimes the words he’d used come back and hit me all at once and it’s *hard*”

“I know” Mike reassures, rubbing Will’s shoulders “But he doesn’t deserve you even thinking about him. Easier said than done, I know, but he really doesn’t deserve to take up space in your life”

“I hate him,” He admits, tone bitter. *So do I*, Mike thinks . He gives Will’s shoulders another reassuring squeeze, before standing, and sitting next to him on the couch again. Will takes his hand “Thank you”

“Anytime” Mike promises him “So. What’s this about you being second best?”

“Really, we don’t need to talk about it. I’m meant to be reassuring you and all I’ve done it made it about myself. The guys will be back in a minute anyway-”

“-you *are* reassuring me. Conveniently, the next point on my list was that *you’re* ok”

Will says nothing for a while, his eyes looking around the room for something to focus on that isn’t Mike.

“Will?”

“Did you know that Nick and El are friends?”

*There goes the ‘what’s said in the room, stays in the room’ rule.*

Despite the circumstances and what has been said, he knows El will

understand that he *can't* lie to Will, not after everything he's just said.

"Yeah. El told me on the phone" he admits

"Oh" Mike can't quite figure out Will's tone

"She actually spoke more about *you* though. She's worried"

"She doesn't seem worried when she's all over him at lunch" Will mutters

"Are you- and it's fine, whatever, but are you jealous?"

He hates how anxious he feels for Will's answer, which is weird, because up until this moment he didn't think he *had* any reason to worry.

Will, quickly turns to face him, a distressed look upon his face " *What* ? No. Mike, no I'm *not*." He places his hands onto Mike's cheeks, rubbing his thumb across them soothingly. Mike relaxes a little "Did you forget about what I said earlier? When I imagine my future, there's *no-one else* , No one else has ever even *come close* " Will's face turns from distressed to intense, and Mike knows he means every word he's saying.

*Oh.*

The jealousy is swept away by a feeling he can only describe as warm. He leans into Will's touch, turning his head slightly and kissing Will's palm.

"So no, I'm not jealous" Will reassures again, letting his hands drop  
"There's just been a lot, recently and I'm just starting to think that

maybe- maybe I'm just a stepping stone to something better"

"A stepping stone to something better?"

"It's like-" Will pauses for a moment, biting at his bottom lip, "You got a NES recently, right?" Mike nods, "Ok and you like your NES and it's got really cool games and it feels like it's the best thing right now. But what happens when Nintendo releases something new, or an upgraded, *better* version of that console? You'll just forget all about the first one. *That's* how it feels."

"You're a bit different to a games console, Wil"

"It's an analogy, Michael" Will rolls his eyes

"In all seriousness, you're *not* second best. Not to *me*. And not to *anyone*. You're *Will*, how could we replace you?" And if Mike notices that Will's lip twitches, he doesn't comment. "I do think you should talk to El though, and not *just* about her and Nick"

The light flickers again but it's so subtle that Mike isn't sure if it's Will.

"I can deal with it myself. I've been dealing with it by myself since Spring Break"

"But the thing is, you don't *have* to. We're all here"

It's at that moment that a voice from outside the cabin door interrupts

"Is it safe to come in?" they hear Dustin call out

"No" Mike calls back quickly. He looks back to Will " *Talk* to her. I really think it will help"

Before Will can reply, the cabin door swings open. Lucas steps over the threshold, mid sentence “*Don’t be ridiculous*” he’s saying to Dustin, who has one hand covering his eyes “*They obviously weren’t going to be doing anything. You can open your eyes, Dustin*” . The Party all filter through the door, shopping bags in hand. Mike notices that El immediately shoots Will a peculiar look, causing Will to look away.

“Everything alright?” Lucas asks, looking between the two of them

“Yep.” Will swiftly stands, making his way over to The Party, taking a shopping bag out of Max’s hands, “You guys relax, I’ll get this ready.”

Mike catches Lucas’ eye once again, who raises an eyebrow at him. He shrugs in return before sighing and clapping his hands together “Yeah, Will’s right. We’ve got this, what can we do to help?”

It’s late when they eventually get to sleep, not really considering the fact that two thirds of them had to be up the next morning for a relatively early bus. Compared to how the night started, the rest of their time spent at the cabin is relatively uneventful; they share snacks, they watch a movie, they play a game of *never have I ever* that Mike finds incredibly satisfying.

“Never have I ever tried to keep one of my friends away from the group for a whole week to fit some dumb friends only rule”

“There’s a rule of this right? Surely this is cheating?”

And Dustin made a point to *not* sleep next to himself and Will.

But despite this, despite the happy atmosphere, Mike couldn’t help but worry. Not *just* about himself now, not just about his mom or the fact the badges were *still* sitting in his pocket, but that when he looks at Will, he notices something is still *off*- And with every glance that

he and El share throughout the night, he knows that *she* knows that too. It makes him unable to fully relax, and keeps an unsettling feeling in his stomach.

---

### **Sunday 28th June 1987. Hawkins, Indiana.**

“I can’t believe you’re ditching us” Lucas groans as he pulls away from hugging Max goodbye at the Greyhound stop, “And you,” he turns his head towards Mike, “Can’t believe you’re going to three weeks. Still not sure how you were able to wing that”

Will smiles, “Well, the invite is always open if you guys want to come too?” it’s then that he promptly receives a nudge in the ribs and hears a muttered “ No.” from Mike

“No thanks, I don’t want to be sharing a room with you two for *three weeks* ” Dustin says, dramatically shivering.

Will notices Mike roll his eyes. “This is *really* getting old, you know?”

“Geez, stop with the bickering.” Max interjects with a huff, “Let’s go already, before the bus leaves without us”

With one final goodbye, Will, Mike, El and Max step onto the bus, showing their tickets as they do.

They make their way to their seats, Mike and Will together on one side of the aisle and Max and El a few seats down on the other side. The bus is relatively empty and for that Will is grateful.

He swings his bag up into the overhead compartment and lets Mike know that he’ll be back in a second, motioning his head towards El. Receiving a reassuring glance in return, he heads to their seats.

“Hey, I want to talk to El a sec. Do you guys mind if we swap back our seats in a second?” He asks Max just as she finishes stowing her own bag and sits next to El. His sister gives him a strange look as

Max stands, moving so Will can sit down.

“I can’t believe you’re making me sit next to *Wheeler* ” she jokingly groans, but moves across the aisle to Will’s seat

“You know you love it” He hears Mike jest, receiving a real groan from Max this time.

Will rolls his eyes before turning to face El

“What’s wrong?” she asks, frowning.

For the first time in months, he lets his guard down, allowing El into the *creepy sibling connection*. It’s an onslaught of emotion he knows, but he thinks it’s time he’s made her aware just what has been going on inside his head.

“Will-what was that? I saw- but that’s not possible, right? We *killed* it. What’s going on? Is everything ok?”

“No” he replies “We need to talk”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading! You can find us, and follow us both on tumblr [@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)

## **7. Hiding in the dark, hiding in the street and of what was following me.**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

El opens her eyes and looks around her, seeing the usual darkness that she's accustomed to whenever she's in the void. She acknowledges the figure in front of her, Will, sitting cross legged, and makes a move towards him, kneeling down at his height when she gets there. She can vaguely make out the echoes of Mike and Max bickering and she wishes they'd stop - they never seem to realise how bad a distraction can be when she's in here - before she reaches out to take Will's hand.

And then there's a shift.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

We hope you enjoy this chapter. It's one of our favourites to write and we've been so excited to share it with you. This contains points that have been building for a few chapters now so enjoy, we're finally getting into it!

A separate note but, we now have a playlist for this fic that we will be continuously updating throughout! You can find it [here](#) It contains all the songs that are used as chapter titles, as well as all the songs features so have a little listen and we hope you like it!

**Sunday 28th June 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

“Will, I’m not lying to Karen Wheeler again” His mom says in lieu of



a greeting as they walk through the door. Jonathan had picked them up from the Greyhound station around two in the afternoon, and they'd taken a very quiet car ride home "She called last night asking if you'd arrived safe and I had to tell her you'd all fallen asleep before you could call. I've already lied about these three weeks, I can't keep doing this."

Whilst he did, of course, understand why Mike hadn't come out to his mom yet, it did put his own in a tricky position. It wasn't that his mom was lying to Karen outright about Mike's three weeks with The Byers, but more that when she'd phoned to make sure it was ok for her son to join them on their '*three week trip to Chicago*' which his mom, understandably, had no idea was happening, she'd been put on the spot; The end result being that for the foreseeable future, three week extended stays will *not* be happening again.

"Sorry, Mrs. Byers" Mike grins sheepishly, "I *did* promise I'd call her when I get here, so *technically* I didn't lie"

His mom rolls her eyes before kissing both Mike and himself on the forehead, "Did you have a nice trip?" she asks, before giving Max and El the same greeting

They all chorus a series of 'yes' but El wraps her arms around their mom's waist

"I missed you" she murmurs into her shoulder. Will notices his mom's eyes soften considerably. There were so many reasons that Will loved just much their family had grown, but his favourite how happy it had made his mom. He watches as she pulls El in slightly tighter "I missed you too, honey" she says softly.

He was glad that El was taking comfort from their mom right now - after their conversation on the bus, El had been, understandably, shaken up. Letting her back in so suddenly and all in one go, wasn't the best idea in hindsight. When they'd first discovered they had this connection - nearly two years ago at this point - he knew how much the onslaught of emotions had affected her then. But, what Will hadn't planned for was how much she was *feeling* too. Being so concerned about his own worries and keeping them locked away, he had neglected to realise how much it was likely affecting his sister

(and if he really thought about it, everyone around him)

*It was selfish, really* he thinks, looking back on the journey a few hours ago. By the time they'd arrived in Illinois he was exhausted, El was scared, Mike was growing more and more restless and Max more confused. It was also getting harder to act as though everything was ok in front of his parents, not just from the frequency he was going through light bulbs, but in the way he *was*. He doesn't *understand*. Everything was fine up until New Year. The moment he allowed himself to enjoy something that was his; the moment he let go of that reminder of The Mind Flayer and reclaimed it for his own.

And he's repaid in nightmarish visions and miniscule cuts on his fingers from shards of glass.

"What about me too, kid? Don't I get a greeting" Will turns to see his dad stood in the entryway to the living room, breaking him out of his thoughts. El pulls away from their mom, belining for him, engulfing him in a similar hug. El loved visiting Hawkins, but if she was away for more than a weekend, she started to get restless and really missed their parents. Will thinks it's due to a mixture of her time in the lab, the uncertainty of a lot of her life and their dad's '*death*'.

"Hi Dad" she mumbles.

He squeezes her back, before pulling away and looking at Will. "Safe trip, son?" he asks

Will smiles at him. He knows it doesn't quite reach his eyes but he hopes his dad won't notice. "Long" he replies "Nice to have a lot of company this time, though"

His dad smiles back "Well, we're glad you're home" he turns to Max, giving her a soft '*Hello*' and then he turns to Mike with a gruff "*Wheeler*"

Mike rolls his eyes "*Hopper*"

Will's mom swiftly claps her hands together, breaking the unnecessary tension his dad and his boyfriend had formed and asks "Who's hungry?"

---

The day is largely uneventful, he catches his parents, and Jonathan, up on *what's new in Hawkins* - though *conveniently* missing out details of what happened at the lake. Despite being back in the safety of their home, he can feel that he isn't *right* still, and in turn neither is El. So, when seven thirty brings Will and Max alone on the couch watching reruns of *Miami Vice* as Mike and El disappeared into her room after deciding to have their Sunday night *gossip* session, he's not entirely surprised. His parents had gone out on a date for the evening ("*I think it's only fair that your dad and I get a little time to ourselves, too*") and Jonathan was padding around the kitchen making grilled cheese, sneaking looks at the TV every so often. Max had questioned why Mike and El were still doing their weekly tradition, considering they'd just had a week in Hawkins, and he was *here* with them ("*Not exactly a lot to catch up on*") but Will considered that El needed that sense of normality, something that he suspects she wouldn't have got if she was just spending all her time with them.

And Mike, of course, insisted after the events of '*friends only*' week and El and Max's *girl time* it was time they deserved.

Leaning forward for a handful of popcorn, Max breaks the comfortable silence that had settled between them. Out of the entire Party, he and Max probably spoke the least, but he really did enjoy her company. She was calm, accepting and he truly appreciated the support and friendship she'd given Mike this past half a year. That feeling was slightly interrupted tonight, however, as he knew she was itching for answers, almost feeling her holding back.

"Does it bother you that you don't know what they're saying?" She asks instead, throwing the popcorn in the air one by one, and attempting to catch it with her mouth.

“Who, Rico and Sonny?” he replies, gesturing to the TV

“ No you moron. El and Mike. Does it not drive you mad?”

He shrugs “Not really. They do this every Sunday-” They hear a laugh coming from El’s room, “ *That* happens every Sunday too”

“What’s with the secrecy, though?”

“Who knows?” he rolls his eyes “They have a rule and everything ‘*what’s said in the room, stays in the room.*’ Mike tells me little bits but, otherwise, who knows? ”

He spots Jonathan out of the corner of his eye, grilled cheese plated up, begin to make his way into the hallway. He’d been meaning to talk with him all day, never quite finding the time between his mom’s excitement of having guests, his dad’s dismay at one of those guests being Mike, and everyone settling in.

“Will?” He’s brought out of his thoughts by Max, raising an eyebrow at him. “Are you still with me?”

“You know what?” He stands from the couch, looking in the direction that his brother had just gone, “I’ll be right back. Is that ok?” Not, staying around for an answer, he makes his way, towards the hall. Being with Max was nice, but he knew their minds were both on the one thing they couldn’t talk about right now. Talking to Jonathan would at least solve one of his easier problems. He feels a bit awkward asking, but he knows it will help him with a comfort he needs right now.

With a sigh Will, calls out “Jonathan?” as he reaches his brother’s door - knocking twice before adding “Can I come in?”

It’s a moment later that he hears “It’s open!” in response. Slowly pushing open the door, he sees Jonathan sat at his desk, grilled cheese in hand. He smiles at Will when he steps inside, closing the door behind him. Making his way over to Jonathan’s bed, he sits down on it, back against the wall and doesn’t speak.

He exhales.

He still doesn't speak.

"Everything alright?" Jonathan asks slowly, before taking a bite of the sandwich.

"Yeah. Yep. Everything's fine. I just wanted to talk to you about something" Will replies quickly, fiddling with the sleeves of his t-shirt.

*This is the easier problem. You were fine earlier, stop acting so awkward about it.*

Jonathan frowns, sets down his sandwich, and makes his way to join Will on the bed, sitting opposite him.

"Are you sure?" he prompts "You seem- *on edge*"

"I am. But only a little. I just need some advice but you can't tell Mom or El. And definitely don't tell Dad"

Ok, ok" he holds his hands up in mock surrender "I won't say anything. Can you tell me what's going on, now?"

Another exhale.

"How did you and Nancy manage to sneak around so much? How did you not get caught?"

He watches the moment realisation fills his brother's eyes.

“Oh”

Another silence.

“Oh”

“Look, if you don’t want to talk about it- that’s fine, just forget I said anything” he moves to stand from the bed but Jonathan holds out a hand to stop him.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to talk about it, I just wasn’t expecting that to be what *you* wanted to talk about”

“Well, I do. So, can we? I get it if it’s too weird”

“No, Will. Look, it’s fine, I don’t mind talking about it. Honestly? I think the reason we weren’t caught is because we were so bad at sneaking around that Mom knew and just didn’t call us out”

*Helpful. And by helpful, I mean not very.*

“Jonathan, I share a *bedroom wall*, with our *parents*. Dad owns *guns* . Multiple guns”

“What exactly are you asking me advice *for* , Will?”

“Wait. *No* . Not like *that* . Not yet” he sighs “Look. Mom and Dad set a camp bed rule back during *Spring Break*. They said they think it’s *fair* , but I don’t sleep well without him when I know he’s nearby. I just wondered if you had any tips so that he could share with me and we, preferably, *didn’t* get caught”

It’s not a lie, not completely. But if he happened to miss out a *few*

details as to why sleeping was a minor problem right now, that was of no concern to anyone but himself. He knows as soon as it was possible Max would find out - he's reluctant (though he considers *anything* to stop the feeling of her trying to get it out of him) but there's no way El wouldn't want her to know. With Mike knowing and now Lucas, too, his web of secrets was becoming more and more entangled and he didn't want to expand it any further.

"Ok" he sighs "Me and Nancy would set an alarm way before we knew Mom would wake up. Nancy would sneak out before we could get caught. I guess in your case, it gives Mike more time to move back to the camp bed. If they check in, they won't see anything out of place"

"That's actually a *really* good idea" Will says

Jonathan rolls his eyes "Don't act so surprised. I have good ideas sometimes"

"So it was Nancy's idea, right?" Will grins

Jonathan sighs again "Yeah. Yeah it was"

Before Will can reply, there is another knock on Jonathan's door.

"Will? Are you coming back? El and Mike are taking ages and *Miami Vice* is boring without anyone to watch it with"

"Just a minute!" he calls back

"Did you just leave her out there?" Jonathan asks, frowning slightly

"It was the only time I could get you on your own without everyone else wanting to know why" he shrugs, standing from the bed "I better go now, though" and he pads across the room

"Will, are you sure there is nothing else going on?" Jonathan says before he can reach the door "Between you and Mike, I mean?"

"No" he reassures, turning his head "I mean it. That's all. For *today* , at least" Will gives a sheepish, slightly embarrassed laugh, and Jonathan replies with an awkward clearing of his throat.

“You can talk to me about whatever, you know that, right? Not just about Mike, about anything really, you know you can trust me” Will nods. Guilt rushes over him but he knows he can’t risk telling him about what’s going on. Not before he knows himself. Jonathan didn’t deserve to be dragged back into something he’d spent so long trying to get out of. “If you need anything, *anything at all*, just ask”

---

It takes two more episodes of *Miami Vice* before Mike and El are finished. They wander back in, Mike mumbling one last thing to El before making his way to the couch, sitting in between Will and Max (“*Move.*”) , and casually throwing his arm around Will’s shoulders. Will nestles into his hold, making an attempt at ignoring Max *dramatic* gag which earned a swift nudge in the ribs from Mike, which *consequently* earned an eye roll from El.

*She looks a little better* he thinks, shifting his gaze from the TV to the armchair where El was situated. And she did; the El he was looking at now was significantly brighter from the one he saw when they’d first arrived back home and he feels relieved more than anything. She looks at him, a questioning look upon her face, which he greets simply with a smile, before turning back to the TV, nestling in a little closer.

“You ok?” He hears Mike ask, softly. He guesses he is, well as much as he can be. He’s happy for *this* , that in this moment he’s ok, that El’s ok and he doesn’t put that down to anything but the friends they’ve had surrounding them today. Because, when it comes down to it, he doesn’t know what they’d have been like if Mike and Max weren’t with them so, when he gives a small “yes” in reply to Mike, he thinks that for a moment he really does mean it.

As it was Mike and Max’s first night here, and with the permission of their parents, they’d ordered pizza for themselves for dinner - though, by the time it arrived, his mom and dad had arrived back home, divulging little details on how their evening was, so it was only fair to let them have a share if they wanted. The night found the family



gathered in the living room (his dad giving Mike the side eye when he noticed their position on the couch) eating straight from the boxes, and watching *Square Dance* on VHS - much to the chagrin of Jonathan, Max and his dad.

“It was a *box office flop*. Come on mom, surely we’ve got something *better* to put on?”

But, of course, El and his mom *had* liked the movie, and so a *ridiculously* long debate about whether it was actually good or not had arisen.

It’s close to midnight by the time they all head to bed that night and, whilst Will hadn’t been directly involved in ‘*The Great Movie Debate of 1987*’, he admits it had been nice to attempt to take his mind off of the more pressing concerns that he had. Though, when Mike is *still* talking about how stupid the movie was by the time they’re in Will’s room, he considers that maybe he wishes his mind could think of anything else.

“So,” Will asks, desperate to change the topic. He’d been sitting back against the headboard of his bed, cross legged, reading a *Spider-Man* comic he’d read thousands of times before. The words all start to blend into one as Mike’s ranting reaches a crescendo, and he reaches across his nightstand and turns on his table lamp, gesturing for Mike to turn off the light. “What did you and El talk about in ‘*gossip time*’?”

Mike rolls his eyes, stopping his dramatic pacing, and heads to flip the switch off (“*You could do this from where you are, Will*” he mutters) before walking across to his camp bed and arranging the pillows. “It’s not *officially* called gossip time you know?”

“El thinks it is”

“We’ve never discussed a name.” He flops himself down, laying on the top of the comforter. “Besides, I can’t tell you anyway. What’s said in the room-”

“-Stays in the room, yeah I know. You do tell me some things though, like at the cabin”

“Not *supposed* to.” Mike stresses “I did tell her about that by the way - that I told you I mean”

Will frowns, “Was she ok? About you breaking the *pact* ”

“She understood, I think. Given the circumstances”

“Has she said anymore about-?”

“ *Will.* ”

He holds up his hands in defeat “Ok, ok. I’ll respect the rule. I’m just *curious*”

A pause.

“Besides, today I mainly spoke about my *boyfriend*. I don’t know if you know him” Will can tell there’s a teasing tone in Mike’s voice and tries to not take the bait.

“Really?” he takes it, raising an eyebrow “Is he *nice* ?” he grins

“*What’s said in the room, stays in the room*” Mike echos, grinning back

“You can’t just *say that* and not tell me *anything*”

“And *you* shouldn’t keep asking about ‘*gossip time*’” And the next thing Will knows is that one of the pillows from the camp bed is being launched towards his head, clipping the side of his face. He laughs, throwing it back, missing Mike by a long shot, causing Mike to groan and roll out of the bed to pick it up off of the floor. Hugging it to his chest, he makes his way back to the camp bed, arranges his pillows once again and settles under the covers. Will follows suit, sliding under the comforter.

“Goodnight Mike. Happy first night of three weeks”

Mike chuckles before yawning “Night Will. Just shake me awake if

you need anything, ok?”

“Ok.”

They're silent for a few minutes, Will beginning to wonder if Mike really had drifted off - they'd all noted throughout the day that they were still feeling the after effects of staying up too late in the cabin combined with the journey home. He sighs, laying on his back looking up at the ceiling, counting the glow-in-the-dark stars and thinking over his brother's words.

“Mike?” He tests. He *had* been pretty quiet so Will knows it's a long-

“Took you long enough to say something. Don't think I've ever heard someone shuffle around so much, and I've got a seven year old sister” Mike turns over in the camp bed, and Will can just about make out a grin

“Shut up, you could have said something too”

“Yeah, but where's the fun in that?”

In mock annoyance Will turns over, pulling his bed sheets higher over his shoulders, hearing Mike laugh again. He focuses again on Jonathan's suggestion, then the words he is about to say, hoping that Mike will be on board with them. He takes a deep breath, exhales and relaxes his grip on the comforter.

“Mike?” he tries again

“Yeah?”

He takes a breath, “Want to break the rules?”

---

**Wednesday 1st July 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

There's a small knock on his bedroom door at half past four early Wednesday morning and, after a small '*come in El*', his sister walks through the door, closing it behind her and moves sits on the empty -

and clearly unslept in - camp bed, taking a quick glance at Mike before yawning, rubbing at her eyes, and then turning her attention back to Will. The look she gives him is one Will would, in his mind, describe as *pity* and he hates it and takes the opportunity to turn on the light, allowing himself to focus on the electricity pulsing through, serving as a distraction from his sister.

“What was it about this time?” she asks with no preamble “Was he still in Benton?”

“Every nightmare I’ve had since the first Benton one has happened here” Will replies, voice still a little hoarse. Mike rubs his shoulder softly “I’m scared that he knows where I am. Where *you* are”

“That worries me, too” Mike adds, biting his lip “Especially because we know he knows who El is - and what she has tried to do to him before”

“This is too much for four in the morning” Will moans, pushing down the voice in his head telling him *he’s only concerned about El* “I just wish these nightmares would stop, or I could at least figure out what *he* wants”

*Oh.*

*I could figure out what he wants.*

El, says nothing for a moment, scanning him with a *particular* look for a moment, making Will feel slightly exposed. It’s only brief but El gives a small shake of her head and sighs before speaking.

“It’s been getting worse since you stopped letting me in, hasn’t it?” El asks, biting at her bottom lip. “But then, it’s not all the time. Only some days.”

Will frowns, “Only some days? El I don’t think I’ve had a week since March when I haven’t had at least one a week. More often than not it’s a nightly *routine* -”

"I still have them sometimes. Of the lab, of *Papa* . It feels really real, like I'm back there with him, but it's just a memory. Dad said there's a name for it"

"But these are *different*. Last time they told me it was *just a memory* it ended up taking over my body."

"That happened so fast, though" Mike notes, expression thoughtful  
"This is happening so slowly. It doesn't make sense"

"Well, maybe he's waiting for something" Will proposes, tone slightly defensive "Maybe he's waiting until one of us slips up and he can see where we are"

"In your dream, does it always look like that? Like it's *you*?" El offers  
"I saw tonight, your guard was down" her expression suggests she was carefully choosing her words. He glances at Mike, who's own expression was unreadable.

"What are you trying to say?" He knows there's a bite to his tone but he doesn't like the way El phrased the question.

"I'm not trying to *say* anything. I'm trying to *understand* ." But she tries again, "Are they always like this, it being only you?"

"Well, yeah but I'm *not* me, am I? Something's wrong, does no-one believe me?"

El stands from the camp bed, before moving to sit on his bed. She holds out her hand, indicating for Will to take it and, after a moment he does. El wears a soft expression, squeezing his hand before speaking again.

"We *do* believe you Will. I'm just thinking that- maybe- It's more-maybe it *is* different this time. When you're not asleep, or maybe when you're in the dreams too, can you *feel* him? Like you could feel in the summer. Can you feel him like that?"

"No. Not quite. It's more like I'm stuck? Almost as if he's doing something *to* me and I can't stop it; like that day on the school field. I just feel *paralysed* "

“And it only happens when you’re asleep?” El verifies

He frowns at the tone of her voice, but after a short delay, he nods his head. Despite confirming that her question was right, he can’t understand why she’s so focused on making sure that he’s asleep whilst this is all happening, and isn’t just concerned about the fact that it’s happening at all. “Why does that even matter anyway?”

“Look, Will” Mike starts “We don’t know if it *does* matter, but it’s important that if this is the Mind Flayer, we know as much as possible”

“I guess” he sighs “Yeah. It’s only when I’m asleep”

Mike reaches toward him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. He gives it a small squeeze, before tracing his fingers down Will’s arm toward his hand, interlocking their fingers “Ok” Mike says after a little while “Why don’t we table this discussion until the sun is actually up? I can tell the nightmare has freaked you both out-”

“I’m not-” Will protests

Mike squeezes his hand this time “Look, I’m just saying maybe we should try and get a little more rest, and try to figure this out later when we’re a little less sleep deprived”

Will nods in agreement. Whilst he knows that sleep isn’t going to come easy, he also knows that he probably should try. It had been a restless night, and his mom is bound to notice if he’s still looking as if he’s just woken up by the time she gets in from work. El, having also nodded in agreement, stands from the camp bed, and starts to make her way toward the door. As she does, Mike shifts the comforter, so that he and Will can slip back under the covers. He asks El to turn off the light as she reaches the door, which she does move her hand toward, but before she can flip the switch she turns her head back to Will and Mike.

“Dad’s not going to be very happy, you know” she says, nodding to them both in the bed

He rolls his eyes “Yes he will because you’re not going to tell him”

El gives him a look he can only describe as devious “Buy me lunch next time we’re at the diner and we’re even” and with that, she turns the light off, plunging them into darkness. Will settles against Mike’s chest, and closes his eyes, ready to try and get a little bit more sleep. A comfortable silence falls between them for a few moments before Mike speaks once more.

“You know, I still can’t believe that you know your dad could walk in at *any* moment and yet it was you that suggested this plan to *break the rules*”

Will laughs slightly, nudging him as best he can at the angle he’s at “You didn’t exactly say no. Now, follow your own advice by shutting up and getting some sleep”

“That’s *not* what I said” Mike retorts

“*Goodnight* Mike” He sighs, but takes hold of the hand that’s around his waist, locking their fingers together once more.

“Goodnight Will”

---

It’s close to seven when Mike decides to get up for the day. He hadn’t really managed to get back to sleep after being woken up in the early hours of the morning *again* so, naturally, he made the decision to make himself useful and put on a pot of coffee instead. He knows the Byers’ house almost better than his own at this point so he’s not really thinking as he follows the steps; opens the cabinet, finds the coffee beans, takes out a mug for himself - acting purely on autopilot until the machine starts up. He wouldn’t voice this to Will of course, but he was *tired*. But if he was feeling like this, he could only imagine what it must be doing to Will, and El by default. For the last couple of days, they’d been taking themselves away for a portion of the evenings, leaving Max and himself alone. He wasn’t sure how much Max knew, or if El had told her anything at all, so when she asked him if he knew what was going on, he’d simply shrugged and replied

*“You know, creepy sibling connection business”*

The coffee finishes brewing and he pours himself a mug. He takes the milk out of the fridge, notices there's not a lot left, so adds just a splash to his drink, before putting the milk away, leaning against the fridge door, closing his eyes and just *yawns*.

“Didn't realise coffee was on *you* this morning.”

He opens his eyes again, looking towards the arch way to see Max walking over to him.

“You're up early.” She opens the cabinet, taking out a mug.

“Could say the same about you, what's your excuse?”

She rolls her eyes before pouring herself a drink, “I'm an early riser - milk?”

“In the fridge.”

“Which you're *leaning on*. Can you pass me it?”

He steps away from the door, switching his mug to his left hand and opens the fridge to give her the carton. She raises an eyebrow at how little is left before muttering a quick *‘thanks’*, and then a comfortable silence settles over the room. They remain like this for a while, Mike cradling his cup whilst Max gazes over to him a few times. It's a moment longer before she takes a sip of her own drink, grimaces and raids the Byers' cupboards for sugar. She finds it in the second cupboard she opens, reaching up for it, and proceeding to pour it into her mug straight from the bag. Mike rolls his eyes at her, before shifting them to look out of the kitchen window at a nearby crow that had landed in the Byers' front yard.

“So, are you just going to stand around, birdwatching in silence or are you finally going to tell me why you're up, too?”



He sighs, "Why do you think?" He finally takes a sip of his drink and wishes he added sugar as well, "Look, I don't know how much you know-"

"If it's the same thing that's getting to El, and also why she snuck out *really* early this morning, then I know enough. Be honest, do you think it's anything bad?"

*I hope it's not. Puts a bit of a sour note on another summer.*

If Mike was being honest with himself, he wasn't too sure. He considers all the possibilities for a moment. If the Mind Flayer was, *is* back, why now? Why not a year ago? But, more importantly, why Will *again*? Surely, after the events of Starcourt, as much as he hated to bring her into it, El would be the more likely target. He never trusted Will's *powers*, something always felt off and he'd been vocal about that to both El and Will. But he thinks back to this morning, thinks back to Lucas' explanation of '*just like Freddie Krueger*' last Thursday and can't help but question if just *maybe* something different was at play here.

Really, Mike felt himself between a rock and a hard place. It's not so much that he didn't think it was *bad*, but more this version of bad didn't seem to quite fit the narrative they had been used to since that week in 1983. So, in response to Max, he doesn't quite know how to answer.

"It's complicated" He settles on

"Complicated? As a group we're *past* complicated I think" Max responds, taking another sip of her coffee. "Thanks for saving me *plenty* of milk by the way"

"I didn't know you'd be up this early" he mutters, "But really, it *is* complicated. *They're* not even sure what they're dealing with."

"But we *are* dealing with *something*?" She replies, eyes widening slightly.

“Possibly” he murmurs under his breath, almost more to himself than her, as Lucas’ and El’s words continue to run through his head.

“What does that even *mean*?”

“Look” he says “It’s really not my place to say anything- it’s up to Will, so please just wait for him to be ready to bring it up himself”

She takes another sip, sighing “Fine. But you’ll let me know if it’s bad, right? If we need any help?”

He gives her a nod, just as Will himself walks into the kitchen.

“Oh, I didn’t know we were having a party at seven in the morning” he says, heading straight to Mike. He gives him a quick peck on the cheek and a ‘*good morning*’ before reaching out and taking Mike’s coffee out of his hands. He takes a sip, leaning back against the counter, his shoulder resting against Mike’s own. He smiles at Max.

“Morning” he acknowledges as he takes another sip “You guys seemed like you were having a pretty intense conversation” he notes, raising an eyebrow

“Nothing important” Max diverts, with a quick look to Mike “Just how *someone* thought that they were the only person in the house that deserved milk”

“I was here first” Mike mocks “Both in the kitchen for breakfast and also as an honorary member of this family. You snooze you lose”

“It is *way* too early to deal with you two acting like this” Will interrupts “Please be quiet until I’ve at least finished my coffee”

“*My* coffee” Mike points out.

“But you’ve just so happened to make it exactly how I like it” Will grins.

“It’s way too early for *me* to deal with you two acting like *this* ” Max says, gesturing between them “You’re a bit too cute for me to deal with sometimes”

“And how many times have I found you at Lucas’ acting all *domestic* and *playing house*”

“As if you’re not-”

“I *still* haven’t finished my coffee, in case you were wondering” Will interrupts, a joking scold to his tone. He raises his pointer finger up toward Mike’s head and makes a shushing noise.

“She started it” Mike mutters in protest

“Mike. *Shush* ” Will says, repeating the earlier motion with his finger.

A comfortable silence settles over the room, interrupted slightly by Max and Will sipping at their coffee. It’s only when Will heads to the cereal cupboard and realises just how little milk there actually was, that he proposes that it might be a good idea for someone to go and buy some more.

“Mike should go, it’s his fault there’s none left” Max protests

“I didn’t magically make the milk disappear, Max” he rolls his eyes “I was just making a drink”

Before Max can retort, Will chimes in “Maybe you can both go?” he suggests.

“Two people for one carton of milk?” Max asks, raising her eyebrow

“Well, no” Will falters “But we still need snacks for games night later, so maybe you could take a longer trip and stock up? It’ll probably need two of you to carry the bags”

Mike frowns a little at Will’s words, and he watches as Max gives him a side eye glance. Will doesn’t seem to notice however, and he continues talking.

“It’s probably best that I stay” he says “It is *my* house, and someone will need to tell El where you’ve gone” his tone sounds casual, but Mike knows him well enough to know there is something underlying and he worries that something is that Will is eager to have everyone else out of the house.

“Well I don’t mind staying, if you wanted to get out of the house for a bit” Mike tests

Will takes another sip from the mug “No, it’s ok. I don’t mind really. You two go and see the exciting sights of Benton-”

“At seven in the morning?”

“Exactly. The best time. No-one will be around.”

Mike and Max share one last look. Mike is sure at this point that Will really *is* trying to get them out of the house and it fills him with a mixture of confusion and worry. He knows that it’s probably because Will wants to talk to El without being overhead (he also knows that the rest of the house will be out today as well) and is taking an opportunity to do so. Despite that, however, it does worry him that the talking might lead to something else, and with no one else around to supervise, he doesn’t know what could happen. Will is acting oddly calm after his nightmare and it makes him feel a little unsettled and he just wants to make sure he is ok.

“Fine” he finally says, pushing away from the counter “Max, let me show you all the good things Benton has to offer”

---

Will sees them out of the door ten minutes later, handing Mike and Max the \$30 that his mom and dad had left them to “*fend for themselves for the day*”. They’d all had an early start this morning - Jonathan being called in at the last minute to the early shift at work, and his mom taking his dad out for a cooked breakfast on the outskirts of town as a ‘*happy first day*’ treat. Thanks to Owens being able to *pull a few strings*, his dad, rather conveniently, had gained some glowing references and was able to get a job as the newest member of the Benton Police Department.

Will finishes the, now lukewarm, coffee and circles round the house a couple of times before finally stopping outside of El’s door.

“El? Are you awake?” He calls. When he receives no response after a few moments, he takes to repeatedly knocking until finally, she opens the door with a “*What?*”

“Why didn’t you answer?”

“I was getting ready. I heard the door. Where have Mike and Max gone?”

“We ran out of milk so I sent them to buy some” El goes to reply but before she can, Will interrupts. “Can I come in?”

She gives him a questioning look before nodding and moves out of the way of the open door. Will walks in, making his way, first of all to her record player. He kneels down, sorting through her collection before picking out *True Blue* by *Madonna*, placing it on the turntable and placing the stylus a little further into the vinyl record. Once *Open Your Heart* begins playing Will stands and sits on the edge of her bed.

“Music?” She questions, making her way over and sitting next to him

“Just thought it might be nice.” He responds matter of factly. Seeing El raise an eyebrow at him out of the corner of his eye, Will sighs and continues. “I did want to talk to you about something though.”

“Without Mike and Max here? Why?”

And Will realises the jig is up so he takes a breath shifting so that he’s facing her, cross legged on the bed and she follows suit, mimicking his actions. He takes another look at the record playing as *Open your heart* reaches the pre-chorus before turning his head back to face her.

“I want you to *look*. Like you did with your mom. Like you did with Billy. I need you to do that with me.”

---

“He wanted us out the house, didn't he?”

“Yep” Mike responds, popping the last consonant.

Unsurprising to anyone, there’s not a lot to see at, now, seven thirty in the morning - the majority of the shops on main street not opening until eight. Though, Mike guesses, Will was right on one thing at least, there was *no-one around*. Despite the early hour, it’s already warm, both of them regretting wearing thin jumpers as the sun hits their skin. Mike’s grateful when they finally make it to the convenience store, if not only for the air conditioning.

“And you didn’t think to maybe make it clearer to him that you’d figured that out?” Max questions as they walk in, picking up a basket near the entrance.

Mike rolls his eyes, “I can’t just do that Max. I’m not going to force him to tell us something he doesn’t want to - milk is Aisle Five by the way - it’s not fair.”

They make their way across the store, heading toward the aisle, but not before adding some *Reeses pieces* and *Razzles* to the basket.

“But don’t you think it’s *real* convenient - Mike, we are not having *Red Vines* when *Twizzlers* are right there - that the only person in the house with him right now is El?”

“I’m *very* aware.” Mike bluntly replies.

But really, what could he do? They didn’t *know* what Will was going to speak to El about (presuming that is what he was planning on doing) so how could they police an action that may not necessarily need policing? That wasn’t to say he wasn’t worried. Will’s blasé attitude this morning, his casual tone, doesn’t sit well in his mind, especially compared to how he was in the cabin, on the bus journey and on their first day in Illinois. So the, rather deliberate, move to get both himself and Max out of the house only serves to make him more unsettled.

*I Wanna Dance With Somebody* begins playing as the reach Aisle Five

and they both grimace causing Mike to snort.

*She's not so bad really. At least on the music taste front.* He thinks as Max opens the fridge door, pulling out a carton of whole milk. She places it in the basket before taking a look at Mike then going back to the fridge and picking up another carton and pushing it in front of him.

"So that you can finally learn about the wonders of *sharing*" Max smirks, waving it in front of his face before placing it in the basket. He raises his middle finger at her before heading out of the aisle.

*I take it back. Never again.*

---

Understandably, El doesn't respond for a moment, observing him with an expression that he couldn't quite pinpoint. The song continues in the background as Will awaits an answer, feeling a little restless the longer she takes to respond.

"El?" He prompts, "Did you catch that?"

"No."

"No, you didn't catch that or?"

"No. I'm not doing it Will. This is a *bad* idea. I'm not letting him back in" El's response is direct and, if Will was being honest, not quite what he expected her to say- that's not to be naive and say he expected her to be completely on board straight away, just that he wasn't expecting her response to be so firm.

"We *won't* let him back in. We know how to fight him this time"

“But you don’t mean that. You *know* we don’t. In the summer, at Starcourt, we got lucky. We almost *died*.”

He knows she’s right, of course she is. But there’s a selfish part of him that *doesn’t care*. More than anything he *needs* to know, needs to find out what’s making him feel this way. What’s been making him feel so unsettled - a feeling that despite everything he can’t shake.

And if there’s even the slightest chance that doing this would fix everything, make everything normal again, or at least give them a way to work towards normal (even if that way was dealing with *him* again) he needs to take it.

“You don’t know what this is like for me - what this *feels* like, every day.” Will clenches at the comforter. “Every night, I’m just *waiting* for it to happen again and then I wake up, and everything, *everyone* is normal and carrying on like everything is fine. But it’s not, it’s *not fine*.” he chews at the inside of his cheek “I don’t understand how I’m supposed to go about my life like nothing happened to me”

El reaches out, placing her hand over one of his own, still grasping at the bed sheet. “You don’t *have* to. All of us are here for you. We *all* understand-”

“But you don’t. None of you know what this is like”

“But I *do*.” El’s voice is firm again. She pulls his hand away from the comforter, and he lets her. She holds his hand with both of hers, giving it a comforting squeeze. Will furrows his brows and gulps as she softly repeats “But I do.”

---

“I’m just saying, I think it’s a little weird” Max comments as they’re walking back down Main Street toward the Byers’. They have two grocery bags each which Mike will explain to the rest of the house was down to himself and Max getting carried away in the store, but in reality, he was trying to buy Will a little extra time. As nervous as



this whole thing made him, he knew that Will wanting this time with El was clearly important, and he wanted to make sure he had enough time as possible.

“Yeah I know, you’ve made that *very* clear, but it’s their thing to sort out”

“You mean Will’s thing?”

“*What* are you talking about *now*? ”

“It’s just Will’s thing, right? It’s happening to him, not to El” she shrugs

“How did you-” he shakes his head “Never mind. Look, they’ll tell you, *Will*’ll tell you, just for now? Leave it. Give them time”

“Fine” she sighs, but drops the subject for the time being. They continue their walk through Main Street, making occasional - not related to the nightmare situation - conversation, and regretting their outfit choices more and more as the sun glares down upon them.

“You’re going to break that bag, you know” Max says after a while, gesturing to where Mike is swinging one of his grocery bags back and forth as they walk. He hadn’t even realised he’d been doing it, but he refuses to let Max know that.

“They’re *fine* ” he bites, making one more dramatic swing with his arm.

“Whatever” she huffs “If you want to be the one at fault for wasting even more milk, be my guest”

---

El walks over to the record player, taking the stylus off of the disc. She removes the record, placing it back into the sleeve before picking up her *Duran Duran* album and placing it on the player. *Is There Something I Should Know?* begins and she makes her way back to him,

still sitting on the bed.

“Ok.” She says with a sigh. She doesn’t look at Will, choosing to remain sitting forward, towards the source of the music. He watches her carefully, her hands tapping against her thighs as she bites at her bottom lip.

“Ok.” She repeats again, finally turning her head towards him. “But if we do this, we are playing by *my* rules. We’re not doing this alone.”

“I don’t want Max to be involved - she doesn’t know what’s going on”

“But maybe I *do* want her involved. Why can Mike be there but not Max? Why can you have someone to be there for you but I’m not allowed?”

Will furrows his brows, “You really don’t think Mike will be there for you?”

“Not quite the same way he will be for you” She responds with a frown. “Do you really think I’m the reason he’s this worried?”

*Yeah. Sometimes I do.*

He’s seen him freak out about her too many times to believe otherwise. From *that* summer, right back to something as mundane as him worrying about whether or not she would *actually* make it to the Snow Ball, El had, in his view - and he was sure he could speak for the rest of The Party when he said this - had always been at the forefront of Mike’s mind, especially in regards to anything *supernatural*. He knew Mike loved him - and he loved him too - and of course, he believed him, but at times, it’s still hard to comprehend how much really had changed in less than a year, both for himself *and* El. Will thinks on how much truly has changed for him. From starting his Sophomore year, to going on his first date, to finally expressing who he is - and then to breaking up with his first boyfriend because *somehow* the guy that he’d liked since he was thirteen likes him back - to then said guy, becoming his boyfriend

and the rest is history.

The last eight months, he'd been exploring an element of his life that he'd been repressing for so long and it was overwhelming to say the least. With this, and everything that had happened in Hawkins for years, he couldn't be blamed if his brain always tried to jump to the worst possible conclusion.

So when he doesn't answer El, it causes her to prompt once again.

"So can I have Max? I want her there with me."

"Fine. As soon as they get back, we tell her."

---

"I really don't think you should be doing this" Mike says, watching as Will rummages through his room, looking for something to be used as a makeshift bandana.

Mike and Max had returned back from their early morning outing to find a very serious looking Will and El on the Byers' living room couch. All it had taken was one "*is everything ok?*" from Max for them to finally explain what had been going on. Mike already knew, obviously, but the way they told it this time, felt different from before. Will seemed more scared than he'd been this entire time, and El's fear matched his, causing Mike's nervousness about the whole situation to make a reappearance and it had not left since they'd returned home- especially after Will had filled them in on the plan they had concocted.

"I *have* to" Will replies, voice firm. He doesn't look up from his searching

"Will, I'm sure there are other ways to figure out what's wrong" Mike attempts to bargain "This seems *extreme* "

Will doesn't say anything, not faltering as he walks to his dresser and

pulls open the top drawer.

“You *know* what happened the last time we did this. You saw what it did to El-”

And then he turns.

“Well what do you expect me to do *Mike*? Just carry on as if nothing is happening to me as long as El is ok?” Will snaps, taking Mike aback.

“You *know* that’s not what I meant” he attempts to placate “I just mean The Mind Flayer knew where we were, do you really want to risk letting him in again?”

“What I *want* is to know what’s going on with me. I don’t understand why you can’t support me with this”

“I *do* support you. I just need to make sure that you’re safe-”

“That *El’s* safe you mean.” Will mutters bitterly

“*What* are you talking about?”

“I think of something that could finally help me, to make all of this go away. But the second El’s involved we can’t do it”

“It’s not because El’s involved that we can’t do it. We can’t do it because it’s a *bad idea*”

Will, abandoning his search with a sigh, moves over to his bed. He throws himself down, hands over his face, knees bent, feet planted on the comforter. Mike watches him for a short while, deciding on his next move carefully. It’s when Will rubs at his eyes that he moves to lay next to him. He doesn’t speak for a moment, thinking over Will’s words and the way he’d been acting. If he thinks about it, this hadn’t been the first time this idea of being the *least important* had been raised by him - he’d said as much at the cabin a few days prior. And he certainly doesn’t forget how there was a subtle change in Will’s expression at the cabin when he’d said they couldn’t replace him. He knows that Will is still thinking over, and dealing with, the fact that El talks to Nick so, he supposes, that anything along those lines of

conversation was a sore spot for him right now.

So, he sighs, and shuffles a little closer to him. Mike reaches his arm above Will's head, across the pillows and feels him relax slightly. Mike takes this opportunity to shift his arm a little more, so it slides under his head, and curves around Will's shoulder, Mike using this new position to guide him into his chest. Will rests his head against him, bringing his own arm up to sit on Mike's stomach.

"I'm sorry" Will mumbles

"You don't need to apologise" Mike comforts "You know *you're* my *main priority*, right?"

"Really Mike, it's ok if she is. You two have been through so much together - so I get it, I do."

And that's true. He thinks about where they started and how he had always wanted to protect her - still *does* want to protect her - and that was something that, relationship or not, won't go away any time soon. But he also has to acknowledge that he'd always cared for Will, too. When he looks back on it, their friendship had always been a little closer than that with Lucas and Dustin, so now, with the added romantic side to their relationship, he needs Will to know just how important he is to him.

"There's nothing *to get* because she's *not* . I'll always care about her, and she means a lot to me so I'm not going to lie to you and say I'm not worried about what could happen to her." He feels Will tense slightly. "But *you* are *always* my main priority and I need you to be safe. I can't have anything happen to you again - I *can't* lose you, Will"

Will nestles further into Mike's chest for a moment, letting out a quiet "*thank you*" which is muffled by Mike's t-shirt. Way too soon, however, Will pulls away, sitting up on the bed.

"We'll be safe, I *promise* we'll be safe. There will be two of us in there this time, El won't be on her own. The *second* something seems off, we'll break the connection. She won't get hurt, *I* won't get hurt." Will is so sure, voice unwavering, and he doesn't break eye contact. Mike

reluctantly sighs, pushing himself up to sit next to Will. “The *second* something is up, get out of there” He echoes Will’s words back to him, who nods once in response.

“Ok. Let’s go deal with this, once and for all”

---

El notices the slight strange tension between Will and Mike the second they eventually walk back into her room. The atmosphere all day had been heightened anyway, and Mike’s attitude once he and Max had returned home had only sought to increase it, so when he had rushed off after Will when he’d gone in search of a blindfold, she knew they would be *talking* about it. She and Max hadn’t been able to perfectly make out their conversation, but the slight occasional raise in Will’s tone through the wall had told her everything they needed to know.

Whilst there is still a little awkwardness between them as they enter the room, she notices Will give Mike’s hand a squeeze and she knows that they’re ok.

Will lets go of Mike’s hand and sits down on the floor in front of her, handing over the makeshift blindfold - today’s being his camera strap with a pyjama shirt wrapped around it for comfort. El gives her brother a *thank you* before beginning to wrap it round her eyes, before she’s interrupted by a voice saying

“Are you absolutely sure you want to do this?”

“*Mike*” Will says, giving him a stern look. Mike holds his hands up in defense, but doesn’t speak again, instead walking over to El’s bed and sitting next to Max - arms folded across his chest.

“So tell me again how this is supposed to help?” Max asks “What good is racking Will’s brain going to do about the Mind Flayer?”

El turns to face her “I think if I can see into it - the way I did with Billy - I might be able to figure out if he’s there-”

“-Which he *is*” Will interrupts. She ignores him, and begins to set the blindfold again

“ -*and* what he might want” she finishes, shrugging “It might not work, and I haven’t done this in a while, but I see why Will wants to try”

“I’ve already said this to Will” Mike speaks again, as she tightens the blindfold at the back of her head “But *the second* it goes wrong, you get out of there. I mean it, El. I can’t risk either of you getting hurt”

“Mike” Will says again, but the edge in his tone is gone this time “I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t think it was the right thing to do. I know - better than most people - how dangerous *he* can be, and if I thought it was putting any of you in danger, I wouldn’t be here. But, I know that could become a possibility if I keep letting him into my nightmares, and I don’t want to be out of control of this again. Back when he did that before, after we found Dad in the tunnels, I felt so helpless. I heard him using my voice to say your name and I was in there, trapped, knowing that he knew who you were, that he was planning on hurting you, and I can’t let him do that again” he takes a breath “You’re *my* main priority, too”

Before Mike can say anything - although El is pretty sure his face says it all if she is accurately picturing the sappy look that would be on it right now - Max lets out a fake gag “That was disgustingly cute. So, are we going to do this or not?”

“Will? Are you ready?” she asks, her own voice sounding a little shaky. She doesn’t think she’s ever ready to go into the void, no matter how many times she does it - especially when she considers what happened the last time they tried this particular method of *exploration*. But ultimately she knows, despite her initial reluctance to do this, if anything was going to give Will the answer he needs, it was going to be this. She doesn’t get an answer straight away, hearing his breathing become slightly heavier instead - so she takes to another method and attempts to *tap in* and reach him in a way they’d done so many times before. This clearly gets his attention as

she hears him clear his throat and give a small “I’m ready”

“Ok.” Is all she says, before she lets herself sink.

-

*El opens her eyes and looks around her, seeing the usual darkness that she’s accustomed to whenever she’s in the void. She acknowledges the figure in front of her, Will, sitting cross legged, and makes a move towards him, kneeling down at his height when she gets there. She can vaguely make out the echoes of Mike and Max bickering and she wishes they’d stop - they never seem to realise how bad a distraction can be when she’s in here - before she reaches out to take Will’s hand.*

*And then there’s a shift.*

*Will looks up at her, tightens the grip on her hand and suddenly, her mind is full.*

-

*“What the hell are you doing here, Lonnie?”*

*She’s stood in the living room of the Byers’ house in Hawkins, watching a very small version of Will, huge box of crayons and lots of scattered paper around him, led on his front coloring in on the carpet. His head looks up when he hears the commotion.*

*“Daddy!” he drops the crayons, and jumps up from his position. El knows*



*she doesn't need to move out of the way, but does out of habit, letting him pass and run into the kitchen. She follows him for a moment, before hearing an unfamiliar voice speak from the entrance way.*

*"What, I can't visit my second-born on his birthday?" His voice sounds slurred, El notes, but before she can get a proper look at him, Will runs back past her, paper in hand.*

*"His birthday was yesterday-"*

*But before she can continue, there's Will, at her side, beaming up at his dad, "I thought you'd forgotten." He outstretched his arms, pushing the paper towards the man in front of him. "Mommy got me some new crayons, want to see what I did-"*

*"Will, honey, why don't you go and see your brother?" She watches as their mom, pushes the paper down before leaning down to him, ruffling his hair, "We won't be long."*

*"No. Let him show me. He wants to, right Will?"*

*El moves a little closer to them once again, and has an overwhelming feeling to keep him safe. She looks between the three of them, to their mom watching Will, to Will's dad, watching their mom and finally, to Will who is looking between the two with a blend of excitement and childlike innocence. She takes a look down at the drawing, taking note of the colors and details, carefully placed behind a boat. Subconsciously, she reaches out for it until Will's voice asking "Can I? Please?" halts her movement.*

*But their mom doesn't have a chance to answer as the man reaches down and takes the picture out of Will's hands. Will shifts on the balls of his feet, before taking a hold of their mom's cardigan and pulling at the sleeve.*

*"What the hell is this? Some kind of - I don't even know what this is"*

*Will falters slightly*

*"Lonnie, don't you dare-" their mom starts, quickly snatching the picture back, holding it behind her back out of his reach*

*"It's- It's a rainbow ship. I drew it with my crayons"*

*"And I love it so much, honey" their mom says, handing it to him "Why don't you go put it back where it was before, so we can keep it safe"*

*"But-"*

*"Will, come on" El hears from behind her, turning to see Jonathan standing in the hallway. Stepping into the room, he reaches out a hand "Grab your crayons and come color with me"*

*Will looks as though he's going to protest one more time, but a quick look at the look his dad is giving their mom makes him flinch, and he shuffles backwards. He takes his brother's hand and goes with him into the living room, sitting back on the floor, Jonathan now beside him*

*"You know mom hasn't stopped talking about how great your drawing is right?" He says, handing Will a few crayons, "I heard her talking to Mike and Lucas' moms about it yesterday when they came to pick them up"*

*"She did?" Will doesn't look at him, instead carefully places the purple and yellow crayons back in their box before taking the ones Jonathan had picked up out of his hands.*

*"She did. It's really cool, Will. I-"*

*"So what, Joyce? I've got one son who can't even shoot a gun and now you're letting this draw all these flowery pictures all the time? What kind of household are you running here? What kind of mother are you?"*

*The best El thinks, as she scowls at the man in the doorway, and makes her way to her brothers, kneeling down to Will and Jonathan's level. Jonathan places an arm around Will's shoulders and whispers something that she can't quite pick up on but she presumes it was at least a little comforting when Will gives a small smile, wiping at his eyes - though tries*

*to hide what he's doing - with the sleeves of his sweater. El reaches forward and takes the blue crayon in her hands, bringing it into herself.*

*"Can I have that back please?" She looks up, to see Will looking at her, head tilted slightly, holding out his hand. It jolts her for a moment, something like this hadn't happened before, not really, but she nods, places it carefully in his hands but, as their hands touch, she finds herself somewhere else.*

-

*"Hi."*

*Will, Mike and Lucas look up from where they're sitting on the floor by the jungle gym*

*"Hi?" It's Mike that answers, giving, who El now recognises as, a much younger Dustin - still capped - a peculiar look.*

*"I'm Dustin. Dustin Henderson. I'm new here." He outstretches his hand towards the group, looking between the three of them. "I heard you talking about the newest Uncanny X-Men comic. What did you think?"*

*"It was good, right guys?" Will answers, a smile on his face. Mike and Lucas glance at one another before nodding. "Want to talk about it?" El notices that he takes a quick look over to Mike and Lucas, almost as a confirmation that it's ok.*

*"What I do want is for someone to shake my hand" Dustin grins and El can't help but smile as Lucas rolls his eyes. He stands up, outstretching his hand in return before greeting him with a "Lucas. Lucas Sinclair"*

-

*El is back in the Byers' house, falling back onto the bed in what had become her room for those last three months in Hawkins. She takes a moment to ground herself though she finds she's interrupted by the barking of a dog as it runs past the bedroom door.*

*They had a dog? She thinks, following it into the living area of the Byers' old house. The dog barks at the front door and continues even as Will enters, in a panic - though still gives him a gentle scratch. Will nearly runs into her as he sprints down the hallway shouting for their mom and Jonathan. Though what catches her attention more is the feeling of what's nearby. It's something she recognises herself, when she thinks back to when Papa made her reach out for it in the lab.*

*"Mom? Jonathan?" Will shouts again, running back into the main room and over to the window. She doesn't follow him, there wouldn't be enough space underneath the blinds even if she wanted to, but not long after he gets there, he pulls away from the window and rushes over towards the phone, frantically turning the dial. This time, she stands next to him, the dog still barking, trying to hear for a voice on the other end of the call.*

*And then they both freeze.*

*Almost in sync, they turn their attention to the front door, watching as a figure appears in front of it and begins to slide the lock. El finds she tries to stop it from happening but nothing works and on the door being unlocked itself, Will drops the phone and pushes her aside before running out of the backdoor.*

-

*El finds she's still standing in the same spot when the memory changes again. She feels slightly off balance, facing the backdoor that Will had just run out of, to find everything slightly warmer now, a little brighter, and turns herself, following the sound of muffled voices to find Will and Mike,*

*dressed as ghostbusters, sitting on the couch. They're talking about Will, about her and then they're both smiling and she knows Will well enough now to notice it's a pure, genuine smile.*

*"Hey Will, if we're both going crazy, we'll go crazy together, right?"  
"Yeah, crazy together"*

-

*Everything seems to blur together after that, moment after moment, memory after memory appearing around her, as if once the gates had been opened, they couldn't close again. This one is slightly different to the others, it's almost flickering - like it's stuck or skipping.*

*It makes her feel uncomfortable and she finds she's unable to focus.*

*She remembers what Mike said "The second it goes wrong, get out of there" and for a moment, she considers it. But then Will is running towards her on the school field, stopping just in front of her and she realises what's going on.*

*The vision of the Mind Flayer looming over him, coming towards him, consuming him.*

*Screams of "Let me go! Let me go!" mixed in amongst "I was so proud" "Do you remember the day Dad left?" and "It was the best thing I've ever done"*

*Will screaming in the cabin, tied down, struggling as their mom turns up the heating and Nancy pushes a fire poker into his side*

*She covers her ears trying to stop the ringing, and closes her eyes, finding the whole situation overwhelming. She wills it to stop, trying to block out all of these feelings and emotions that are washing over her so rapidly it feels like she's drowning.*

-

*She's grateful for the next shift in location.*

*She's at the Snowball now, and the memory makes her smile. She weaves through the couples dancing and spots herself and Mike dancing to 'Every Breath You Take' and wonders why this had ended up as such an important memory for Will. She looks for him, finally finding him in the crowd, dancing with one of the girls from Hawkins Middle, but he's not looking at her, he's looking over at Mike instead.*

-

*Will up late one night, the calendar on his wall showing May 1985, touching the back of his neck, a distraught look on his face. He rubs angrily at the spot, as if he's trying to erase the problem, but he only grows more and more agitated and he grounds out a "I thought this was over", and by the look on his face, El knows exactly what he means,*

*He can feel him.*

*Another shift, more moments from that year swirling around her, Will looking at her and Mike as they left The Party behind with Cerebro, the boys shopping for her and the constant look of disappointment on his face, him and Mike fighting "It's not my fault you don't like girls" echoing loudly around her, Will in the rain, bat in hand, standing outside Castle Byers, repeating "stupid" over and over.*

*The Party happily reuniting at the mall, despite the circumstances they were in. The group hug, Will smiling, him reuniting with his mom after the fight they'd all suffered through.*

*El moving in and getting Will's room, Will having to share with Jonathan,*

*the small argument he'd had with his mom about it when no one else was around.*

*Will spending more time alone, avoiding phone calls and his friends, avoiding Mike. Seeing him again for the first time alone since their fight.*

*Spending time making a mixtape, notes scribbled on paper around him, trying to make it perfect.*

*Leaving Hawkins. Final hugs, tears.*

*So many cardboard boxes.*

-

*They're out of Hawkins, now, though El isn't entirely sure when this is. She spots Will next to a payphone, inserting a few quarters.*

*"Hi Lucas"*

*"Will?" It's different this time, Lucas' voice ringing all around her from the phone "What number are you calling on? Where are you?"*

*"I just went for a walk, had to get out of the house for a bit"*

*"Mike and El being too, Mike and El?"*

*Oh. It was then.*

*She notices Will takes a breath, pinching at the skin of his arm "Yeah, something like that"*

*"Are you ok man?"*

*"What? Yeah, I'm fine just- just a bit fed up with How Deep Is Your*

*Love?" he sighs, slumping against the wall of the phone box.*

*"Hey, look, do you want me to come for the day? We can hang out, catch a movie-"*

*"No, no it's fine. I'm sure you've got stuff to do"*

*"Well, not really. A date with Max but she'll understand. Not a lot happens in Hawkins anymore not since-"*

*"Since we left? Guess me and El are just a magnet for trouble"*

*"Hey no, I didn't mean it like that. It's a good thing right? That nothing is happening. We can just be us again. We can just be sixteen"*

*"Almost sixteen"*

*Lucas snorts "Almost sixteen then. This is good though. It's been a year and nothing's happened. To me, It feels like it's finally behind us"*

*"Yeah." El can hear the reluctance in Will's voice, "Finally"*

-

*Now she finds herself in the middle of the Benton High School Art Department.*

*"So." It's Nick, El realises, smiling at him even though he can't see her. He puts his paintbrush down and turns round on his chair to face Will.*

*"So." Will smiles to himself, continuing to paint.*

*"I have a proposition"*

*"That sounds ominous" Will laughs, finally putting down his own brush.*

*"I've been going to your house, a lot. You've been coming to mine a lot,*



*too. A lot of those times we've been holding hands and I wondered if maybe, you might want to hold hands some more? Maybe on a date, though. Instead of at our houses"*

*"You want to go on a date? With me?"*

*"Yeah, you see the thing is, I kind of like you, Will Byers. You're kind of something"*

*Will beams at him.*

-

*It then moves to last November and December; Will coming out, their friends being supportive - so supportive. There's more dates with Nick, and Will smiling- really smiling. But there's something deeper and when she sees the three, Will, Nick and Mike, sitting in the diner, sharing chocolate cake, El doesn't quite know how to react when Mike's face isn't exactly clear.*

*Was he ignoring it? Or blocking it out? El isn't quite sure but before she can get any closer to the table, the scene changes around her again and it's a moment she remembers very well, as she watches herself and Mike in her room, Will shouting, cursing out Mike, kicking him out of his room. El follows Will back to his own, making it in just in time before he slams the door - watching as he moves over to shelves, taking off the polaroid that had pride of place in the centre and throwing it in his wastepaper bin.*

*He's about to lay down on his bed but then he sees it. On the floor is a sweater the household had become accustomed to those last few days of Christmas - Mike's sweater.*

*And as he leans down to pick it up, everything shifts again- all feeling just that little brighter. Happier moments with Mike; talking on the swing in their backyard, getting together, holding hands, long talks on the phone, their first date, first kiss, so many little moments shared, both of them so*

*happy.*

*“I do, though. Love you, I mean”*

*“I know”*

-

*And then it stops. And she's back in the black void.*

*Will is still there, the slightly echoed voices of Mike and Max are back but there's nothing else. She's a bit taken aback but how sudden it ends and fears that maybe Will's suspicions had been right all along - after all, the last time it ended like this Billy, or rather the Mind Flayer, took the opportunity to speak to her directly. She lets go of Will's hand and braces herself for the inevitable.*

*But there's nothing. No-one comes. And Will remains seated, on the floor, and the voices still float around her. She takes a final look around, still nothing, and pulls her attention back to Will once again.*

*And she understands, now, exactly what this means.*

*“El? El?” she hears, the sound becoming ever more clear in her mind.*

*“Is she ok?” Max's voice rings out and El, satisfied, begins to take herself out of the void.*

*“Does she look ok?” It's Mike this time, “She's not reacting is she, Max?—”*

-

"I'm fine" she finally manages, voice a little croaky. She pulls the blindfold off before looking around the room at the startled faces of Mike, Will and Max. She touches under her nose with her fingers before Max hands her a tissue.

"What is it? What did you see? What was there?" Will asks, voice a little shaky. She can hear the light on Will's nightstand buzzing, the air feeling like static.

"Will, I-"

"Did you find *him*? What does he want?"

"It didn't- It didn't feel like *anything* was there" she admits "You just felt like *you*"

"That's good!" Mike reassures "Means everything is ok, right?"

"Are you absolutely sure?" Will demands, as if Mike hadn't spoken

"I promise. I didn't see *anything*" she reaches for his hand in real life now

"I dont- it doesn't- there *has* to be" he's speaking faster and more sporadic than usual and the lights in her room start to occasionally glitch on and off.

"Will, hey," Mike tries to comfort "This is good, it means The Mind Flayer isn't there, it means he's not trying to hurt you"

He continues to ignore her outstretched hand, and El watches as both of his own start to shake.

"You *must* have missed something. *Try again.*"

"Will, *no-*"

"Well what am I supposed to do then?! Just carry on like this for the

rest of my life? Something is *wrong*."

"Will, you need to—" El tries to take hold of his hand but he pushes it away.

"What's *happening to me?!*" Will cries out, tugging at his hair with his hands. All of the lights flicker frantically for a moment before they stop, pause, and then *shatter*. El knows it isn't just the lights in her room, either, as the noise echoes throughout the house. She's about to say something, *anything*, to try to calm her brother down, but before she can even open her mouth, the bedroom door bursts open, revealing their mom and dad standing at the threshold.

"What the *hell* is going on here?"

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading! You can follow us both on tumblr [@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)

## 8. I can't get used to living without you by my side

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Are you ok?” is all she says. It’s such a simple sentence, one he’d answered many times in his life, one that he’d been asked so many times today. He takes a breath and after all the deflection, all the fighting with himself, he finally reaches a point where he’s so sick of pretending the answer is something it isn’t.

“No” he rasps out “No I’m not.”

### Notes for the Chapter:

we're sorry

We now have a playlist for this fic that we will be continuously updating throughout! You can find it [here](#) It contains all the songs that are used as chapter titles, as well as all the songs features so have a little listen and we hope you like it!

*“What the hell is going on here?”*

It’s not entirely surprising that Hopper’s words are ignored by the group. Between the light bulbs shattering around the house, the rather compromising position of Will hunched on the floor, clutching at his hair, El with a blindfold next to her, the smallest amount of blood still flowing from her nose and Mike and Max sitting on the bed, a dumbfounded look on both their faces, Mike considers that it was pretty clear *what the hell* was going on.

“Someone better *damn well* answer me” Hopper says through gritted teeth.

They don’t have time to answer as Joyce rushes in, paying no mind to the splinters of glass that could hurt her, instead kneeling in front of Will. She places her hands over his own, hands that are still tugging at his hair, and attempts to soothe.

“Will, baby, look at me. Can you do that for me?” Her voice seems calm, but Mike knows her well enough that he can sense the worry underneath.

When Will doesn’t respond, instead just continuously shaking his head in small movements, Joyce frantically turns to El for answers “What happened?”

“I’m so sorry” she chokes out “I didn’t know-”

“Kid, what did you *do*? ” Hopper asks, stepping further into the room.

Mike shares a glance with El, who gives him an imploring look. He’s not sure what to do, if they don’t say anything, they’re in trouble. Though if they *do* say anything he knows there’s no way they’re *not* in trouble. Eventually, he gives her a reluctant nod of acknowledgment.

“It’s not her fault” He tells them, not looking away from El. “Things just got a *little* out of hand and-”

“Oh, a *little* huh?” Hopper now pulls his attention to Mike, face fuming, “If this is a *little* I’d love to know what you consider as *really* out of hand.”

“Hop. ” Joyce chides, frowning as she turns to Mike “What *things*? What’s going on?”

“We can’t say” El speaks for him, rubbing Will’s shoulder, “I promised-”

“El, you are on *very* thin ice” Hop bites “Look at your brother; he looks *terrified* . Someone better start talking-”

"It was me" Will mumbles, head still shaking. He opens his eyes and lets go of his hair, taking hold of his mom's hands instead. She's still soothing him, even as Will brings their hands down in front of them. "It was me." he repeats. "I did this."

"Will, honey, what do you mean?"

"I asked El to look for me. I asked her to look for it. The Mind Flayer. In the void."

Mike glances at Joyce noting that she looks like she's trying to speak but can't quite vocalise what she's trying to say.

"What does this - Why are - Why are you messing around with it? It's *dangerous*."

Will looks directly into her eyes, nothing but panic in his own.

"Because I think something's wrong with me. I don't feel like it ever left" his voice raising an octave as the sentence continues. Mike notices Joyce's hands trembling even though they're in Will's own.

"*What?*" Joyce exhales.

A peculiar atmosphere settles over the room. Mike shares a look with El and Max, one born from the conversation they'd had before Joyce and Hopper had walked in. He'd heard what El had said, and he was starting to agree more and more that this *wasn't* the Mind Flayer, and maybe something else within Will's mind. "*You just felt like you*" is what El had said to him, moments before, and Mike wonders if there's more weight to that statement than he'd originally considered.

"Living room" Hopper growls, breaking Mike out of his thoughts "All of you. *Now*."

---

Will doesn't really remember getting to the living room, just that at one point his mom had helped him up off the floor, and the next he was being set down on the couch in between El and Mike. He's aware that his parents aren't happy, but the words aren't quite processing - like it's only his body that's present, like his mind isn't really there. He's trying to piece together what had happened, what had gone *wrong*.

*I asked El to look.*

*She looked.*

*She said there's nothing.*

*But there has to be something.*

"How could you keep this from us? After *everything*, did you not think this was something we needed to know? You should've *told me*" He vaguely hears his mom scold. El tenses next to him on the couch, almost like she's flinching. His mom is talking about the powers, of course, and he thinks back to when himself and El had first discovered them at Thanksgiving two years ago - a comment about how he felt was similar to when she saw Mike with Max, another about how he didn't want a reminder of what happened in 1984 and the summer just past. No more reminders of *His hive mind plan*.

How he'd told her they couldn't say *anything* , how they couldn't *use them*.

-

*"Don't tell Mom, either. The last thing she needs when we've just moved to a new state is think we've brought a part of this whole thing with us."*



*"We don't know when it will happen. It could be random, like today. What if we can't control it?"*

*"We have to."*

-

And he thinks how much stronger they'd become since.

*El would have seen so much of me. Too much. How could she miss it?*

"Since 1985. You've both been keeping *this* a secret since 1985." It's his dad this time, his tone strained " *Two years.*"

"We've only been practicing since January" El interjects.

"Oh! Since *January!* You should've told us the *minute* something felt off."

"He's right" his mom agrees "After everything you've been through, everything *we've* all been through, I deserved to know the moment you realised what was going on. You've risked so much by keeping it to yourselves. We *got* that thing *out of you* and I've been living thinking it was gone for good but now you're telling me you think it's still been here this whole time?"

*We got that thing out of you.*

But they didn't. They can't have. This connection wouldn't exist if they had. What was happening to him wouldn't exist if they had. These feelings, these powers, these *dreams*. Why were they happening if it was gone?

“That’s it. I’m calling Owens. I’m not negotiating on this one. If it’s still here-”

“It’s not” El interrupts.

“*What?*” it’s their dad again.

“It’s not there. I looked. *It’s not there*” she repeats.

-

*He hears echoes of his past self screaming “go away, go away, go away” on the Hawkins middle field, and the feeling when his body was invaded.*

-

Will’s hands instinctively move to push into his hair before Mike stops them - reaching for his right hand and pulling it down, interlocking their fingers. He swallows and lets out a laboured breath. An uncomfortable feeling settles in his chest and now, slightly more in the present he’s not sure how he feels about the conversations going on around him. It’s like they’re speaking for him, telling him how to feel, telling him *how* he feels, like they know when they *don’t*.

And then it hits.

*They don’t believe you. They never did.*

“So what, am I just making this whole thing up?”

-

*He’s stuck, stuck in that place and all he can do is stand and watch as*

*Lonnie turns to look at his mom, takes her hand and tells her "...I think you need to seriously consider the possibility that all this...it's in your head"*

*And he's shouting "No it's not, I'm right here, Mom, I'm right here " over and over until he's crying and his voice is hoarse.*

-

*"I told you before, that's not what I'm saying" El defends and he feels her hand on his arm which he immediately shakes away. She sighs "I saw something, but it wasn't The Mind Flayer, or anyone else, really. It just felt like you, but like you're stuck-"*

*"Stuck?" Mike echoes.*

*"This was supposed to be a discussion with the whole family" their dad interjects.*

-

*He bursts through the front door, running as fast as his seven year old legs will carry him, wiping at his eyes as he slams his bedroom door shut, Lonnie's words echoing around his head on loop*

*"Why can't you just be into normal things, like football and baseball. Why do you have to act like such a f-"*

*He tries to block out the memory from earlier that day, but he can hear Lonnie in the living room, arguing with his mom, calling him that same word over and over.*

*Even at seven he knows what it means.*

-

“El, where was Will stuck?” their mom asks. “What did it look like?”

“It’s not a place. It’s Will.”

“Wait,” Max finally speaks “Will is stuck *in Will*?”

“*Obviously not* , Max.” Mike mocks and he feels him squeeze his hand, which he doesn’t reciprocate. “El just means-”

“*Hey!*” His dad claps his hands together twice, “ *Family. Discussion.* Are you absolutely *sure*, El?”

“Yes. It’s like he’s stuck in thoughts. In memories. It was *loud*. Busy. Like not even Will could make complete sense of them.”

They’re still talking about him - *as if I’m not right here* - and the uncomfortable feeling from earlier feels ever more constricting as it builds and builds and builds. His left hand now taps against his thigh, rhythmically, as a way to release the tension he can feel rising- an outlet or he feels he may *explode*.

“But, definitely no Mind Flayer.”

*She’s lying.*

A beat.

*She has to be, right?*

*...right?*

"In one of the memories, he spoke with Lucas" she continues on, "He was feeling like-

"He is right here." Will snaps, having had enough of the *third person* talk. "I speak with Lucas a lot. That doesn't narrow it down, El"

"Ok. " Her voice is calm, neutral - *patronising* - " *That* day. When Mike was visiting *me* . You said you were fed up with how much *How Deep Is Your Love?* was playing."

*Oh. So when you were dating my boyfriend, then?*

There's an awkward atmosphere in the room and Mike *shrinks* into the seat next to him, letting go of Will's hand as he does so.

"*How Deep Is Your Love?*" Max laughs.

"Don't-" Mike mutters.

"Wow Mike, didn't realise you were such a *romantic*. Why would El have *ever* broken up with you?"

-

*He's sat in the playground, himself, Mike, Lucas and Dustin all reading The Amazing Spider-Man and breaking their comfortable silence every so often.*

"MJ is so cute" Dustin remarks, as he turns the page.

"She's no Lisa P" Lucas gushes.

"You've known her a day " Mike rolls his eyes "She just transferred here."

*Will stays silent.*

*"What do you think, Will?"*

*"What?"*

*"Who's better, Lisa P or MJ?"*

*"I don't-I don't really know" he admits "I prefer Peter Parker."*

*They say nothing for a moment.*

*"Yeah" Dustin finally agrees "He's - Peter Parker is cool, Will."*

*"Really cool" Lucas adds.*

*"Yeah" Mike says, tone void of emotion "Cool"*

*And if later that day he pays a little bit more attention to how Mike was acting, he doesn't let himself admit the reason why.*

-

*"Shut up, Max. Like I haven't heard You Are The Sunshine Of My Life through my bedroom window-" Mike mutters.*

*"Wheeler" his dad grinds out "If you've got nothing useful to say, don't say anything"*

*"Ok," Will doesn't hide his irritation "So you have some romantic memories with my boyfriend. Congratulations. Mind telling me why you're bringing that up?"*

*"Wait, Will-"*

*He puts his hand up, not bothering to look at Mike, though he catches Max's eye across the room as she raises her eyebrow at the*

exchange.

*Why are we even talking about this? This wasn't the point of the conversation. Why raise it now?*

El audibly sighs before going back to the topic at hand "You were talking. Lucas asked if you were ok, if you wanted him to come here. He said about being sixteen, everything being behind us. But I don't think you felt the same. I *know* you didn't feel the same."

-

*He slams the door shut walking over to his shelves, picking up the polaroid of himself and Nick. He looks at it for a moment before, fingers tightening as he holds it. Emotion courses through him and he crumples the picture in his fist as tight as he can. He holds it for a few moments, letting the emotional high fade slightly before realising what he'd done and he frantically tries to even out the creases in the photo. He stares down at it again, a mixture of guilt and regret rushing through him. Not wanting to see it, feel it anymore, he throws it in his wastepaper bin.*

*Shoulders heavy, he makes a move to lay down on his bed before he spots it - on the centre of his floor is Mike's sweater. He leans down to pick it up, holding it in shaky hands.*

*"Why?" He mutters, jaw clenched "You don't get to do this. It's not fair" he hears the break in his voice, blinking back tears. Everything was perfect, he was moving on, getting everything back on track and then -*

*Mike.*

*"Fine, you want to do this? Yeah I had to try to act happy because in reality it was killing me. You want to know what happened at the arcade? Really? I was asked out on a date by this guy. Jesse. And he was nice, and he made me laugh and he gave me his number but guess what, Will? He wasn't you."*

*Will hugs the sweater to himself, lying down on the bed, finally allowing himself to cry.*

-

The memory sits heavy in his mind, and he tries desperately to turn it off. It feels like re-run after re-run with no way to stop it.

Life was so good, things were normal and with everything going on, it's overwhelming to say the least. It's not that things aren't good now, they *are* , and if Will thinks about it, despite everything, this is the happiest he's ever been. But there's an underlying sense of *waiting*. As if at any moment, that could change, that he'd be right back to where he was in Hawkins, *back in that place and back to running, back to crying, back to feeling on edge, feeling everything.*

But what worries him is that there's a part of him that wants that *scary* back.

And if he allows himself for a moment to really think about it.

He doesn't know who he is without it anymore.

*No.*

"What does *that* have to do with *anything* ?" He can hear that his tone



is defensive. *Too* defensive.

“I think that’s what’s going on” she tells him “I said I couldn’t feel the Mind Flayer, and I meant that, but there is a bad *feeling* in your head. The memories, thinking about everything that happened, it’s still hurting you”

“You don’t get to tell me what I’m feeling. That’s all you’ve done, tell *me* how *I* feel”

“Will. I’m *not* telling you how you feel, but you asked me what was wrong and this is it. *This* is what’s wrong” El tells him, voice quiet and calm.

There’s a change in his mom’s face, a softness that hasn’t been there at all this evening and he’s not sure that he likes it. She’d *always* been there, always the first one to believe him. Always been proactive in helping him but now he thinks he’s lost that too. “Will, honey, you can talk to me, no matter what is, or what’s causing this, I want to know so I can help.”

“But I’ve - I’ve told you what’s actually causing this. It has to be that, right?”

*But you know it isn’t. Just let yourself admit it.*

“What we know is that you’ve been through something that you should’ve never had to experience; something we’re *all* still processing” she cradles his face in a comforting gesture “There’s so much that even me and your dad are dealing with. It’s almost as if now everything has settled, your brain is trying to work through the bad stuff and I can’t imagine these powers have helped. They’ve given you a constant connection to all of it.”

Her words swirl around him as his mind races. Everything that happened the last few months on repeat. He thinks about every nightmare - how the Mind Flayer knew where they were after so long. He thinks about the struggle to accept who he is and how for so

long he hated himself for it. He thinks about Lonnie's constant stream of derogatory words. His friendships and his relationship. He thinks about all of the loss and destruction he'd caused, all of guilt he still felt resting on his shoulders.

"Will? Are you ok?" Mike's voice breaks him out of his thoughts, and something inside of him just breaks.

He finds he can't be there anymore. So he doesn't answer, pulling his mom's hands away and standing from the couch. Walking past everyone he heads toward the hallway, his dad asking "Where do you think you're going?"

"My room" he says, not turning "Might as well leave, it's not as of any of you even care-"

"We do care, Will. All we've done this afternoon is care" El interrupts, eyes glimmering "All we've done since Spring Break is care. Mike's always checking in when we call each other"

Will clenches his fists "Oh, really?" he bites, turning back towards the group.

*Stop it. Don't say anything else. You're going to ruin it.*

"So he didn't think you could check in with me and had to go through his *girlfriend* instead?"

*Shit.*

His mom frowns, looking between them "What's going on?"

But Mike glowers at him, his voice firm. "Really, Will? After

everything we spoke about last week. After everything we spoke about *this morning?*”

“Hey, look,” Max stands, waving her hands in an attempt to defuse the tension. “If this is about what I said-”

“Forget it.” he mutters, finally stalking out of the living room and into the hallway. He ignores the multiple calls of his name as he reaches his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

---

The first thing Will does after slamming his bedroom door is grab the sketchbook off his side table and sits down with a *huff* on the centre of his bed. Forgetting a pencil, he reaches across, feeling for the drawer on the table, eventually pulling it open and taking one out. He doesn’t know what he’s drawing, mindlessly scrawling across the paper in an attempt to block out the increasingly loud voices in the living room.

*“Oh, so you expect me to just leave him?”*

*“No, Joyce, I think you just need to give him time to calm down and then maybe he can talk more rationally”*

*Oh.*

*Thanks Dad.*

The voices getting louder, he pushes himself off of the bed to walk over to his tape deck. He sees there's already a cassette inserted and presses play, not really caring what it is and, as *I Want To Break Free* by *Queen* begins, Will stalks back to his bed and back to his aggressive doodling.

The thoughts continue to spiral around his mind as the sketchbook page gets darker and darker, filled with an array of patterns and words. All those months, wasted. All that worrying, for nothing. He'd been so sure of what was wrong, how could it be anything else - how could something so fundamentally *human* be happening to him? There's a mixture of guilt and embarrassment, all laced with an undercurrent of worry and panic and helplessness.

How is it that his own thoughts and feelings are going to be harder to untangle than being possessed by a being from an alternate dimension?

But despite this, despite a realisation that *maybe* it isn't something supernatural anymore, he can't shake the thought that *no-one believed him when he thought it could be*.

Lucas, upon finding out about the dreams not even a week ago, told him just that, that *it was a dream*; El, early this morning telling him the same thing - that she has similar nightmares, but about the lab. And then, the more he thinks about it, Mike and Max's *serious conversation* mysteriously stopping as he walks into the kitchen. They'd all be so quick to try and make him believe that it's not the Mind Flayer that they didn't take a moment to acknowledge that it could be.

*So, El agreeing to look. Was that just out of pity? Just to shut me up?*

*Is that why Mike went along with it too? Is that why he said it was a stupid idea?*

*"I'll go and talk to him"*

He hears El say over the music, so he presumes that she's near his door. He gets off of the bed once again and turns the music up a little - a lot - louder.

*Well, if this isn't a horribly similar set up to New Year. Same people, same place, same root of the problem. Me.*

*What are you trying to do?* He asks himself *Why are you still trying to avoid what's right in front of you?*

*Why is this harder than fighting demogorgon's has ever been?*

*What am I supposed to do?*

There's a knock at Will's bedroom door as he's stood by the tape deck.

"Will, please can we talk?"

Deciding that's something he *absolutely* does not want to do Will turns the music up once again.

Another knock, then another, and again until he's had enough and strides towards the door, forcefully pulling it open.

"Really? You want to *talk*?" He spits out "Haven't you done enough?"

"I want to help. I know how you feel-"

"How can you *possibly* know how I feel? To have everyone just make me feel like for the last few months I've been going crazy? To have my *whole family* not believe me-"

*But you know that's not completely true. Stop doing this.*

"We *did* believe you" she protests.

“Funny way of showing it” he shoots back, before taking a step back and moving to close the door.

*Running away again.*

“Will, wait.” he hears, but it’s not El this time. He stops his movements, looking out into the hallway to see Mike briskly walking toward his room.

“Come to support your girlfriend?” Will glares at him, folding his arms across his chest.

“Will, *come on*” Mike says exasperated, as he reaches the doorway. He puts his foot forward, stopping the door from being completely closed  
“Let me in?”

“No.”

“Will-”

“Just leave me alone. I was dealing with it fine on my own until everyone got involved”

“I’m not just going to leave you” Mike protests

“Well, I don’t need to be babysat” Will scoffs as he turns away from the door, making his way back to his bed and his abandoned sketchbook. It’s a lapse of judgement in not trying to shut his door and he needn’t look to know that Mike has taken the opportunity to make his way into his bedroom and as he hears the door close firmly behind him.

The music turns off as Will sits down.

"I was listening to that" he mutters, flipping a page and scratching at the paper once again.

"And *now* we're talking" Mike answers back, sitting on the edge of the bed. "You know it's *ok*, right?"

"*What* Mike? What's ok? Because I *really* don't know"

"It's ok that it's not something *big* anymore-" Will flinches. "-I didn't mean it like *that* . I just mean it's not The Mind Flayer" he stresses "But it's not that we didn't believe you, because we *did* - you *know* I did Will. Why do you think I didn't want El to look? I was so worried and didn't want you to get hurt. But now we know what it is, we can *help* you. We *want* to help you. Will, you are *the most important* thing to me and I just want you to be ok"

"If I was the '*most important thing*' to you, why were you talking about me behind my back?"

"Will, I wasn't talking about you behind your back, I was asking to make sure you were *ok*. I just wanted to know if El could feel *anything*-"

*Wait.*

"The cabin - that's what you were talking about?"

"What are *you* talking about?" There's undertones of exhaustion in Mike's tone.

"When your mom overheard you and El talking on the phone, It was me you were talking about? After *everything* we spoke about that day, you didn't think it would be a good time to tell me?"

"Will, why are you focussing so much on this? Why are you making it about *me*? I'm just trying - we're all just trying to make sure you're ok. I get that you're upset but all of this was for *you*"

Will doesn't respond, continuing to colour the page. '*Why are you making it about me?*' because he *has* to. Because he can't talk about this. Because deflecting is the only easy thing right now.

"Look, let's just go back outside and we can *all* talk about this. All of us just want to make sure you're ok-

*No.*

"If you're just going to lie to me, feel free to leave" Will haphazardly waves his arm in the direction of the door.

*Deflecting. Again*

"*Stop it.* I'm *not* lying, Will. What do you want me to say?" Mike snaps, standing up from the bed and moving back towards the tape deck. He taps at the sides of his legs, and rocks on the balls of his feet before turning back, sharply towards Will. "Ok. Fine. If you're so focussed on that rather than what's *actually* going on here, I was worried about you, and El was the only one who would reassure me you were ok. I don't *care* if you didn't want to tell me about the dreams, or about anything at school, or with Nick, or *even* Castle Byers, that's *fine*, I'm not one of those boyfriends who thinks their partner has to tell them everything, but I just want to know why you thought you had to keep all of this Mind Flayer stuff to yourself. After everything that's happened over that last four years, I don't know why you felt like you couldn't even *come to me*"

"Because *I didn't want to.* If you haven't noticed, whenever I tell people things, *things go wrong* , and then they give me advice and then *something bad happens.* Like right now, everyone's just telling me how I feel and that it's all in my head"



“No one thinks it’s all in your head, Will. We just want to know exactly *what* is in your head so we can *help*”

And then it happens.

He snaps.

“Fine” he starts, throwing his sketchbook down next to him. “You wanna know what’s in my head? Where should I start? Shall we talk about how it’s been *four years* and I can’t seem to catch a break, how it seems to be one thing after another and I was just *left* watching everyone grow up and move on whilst so much was taken from me. How about the fact that the *second* I think ‘*wow, maybe this time things will work out for me*’ apparently the universe decides that now I get *powers* and I’m dragged right back there again.

“And not to mention, I became all the things my dad said I would be. Deep down, I *know* being gay isn’t bad, but, sometimes I can just hear his voice and all the words he used to call me, how right from the start I was never what he wanted me to be and I hate that. It took me so long to become ok with who I am, to stop hating myself and I hate that sometimes I still wish I *could* be what he wanted. I just seem to come with so much baggage and I know that even if me and you hadn’t gotten together, my relationship with Nick was doomed from the *second* he asked me out on a proper date, in the art room that October, because I would’ve had to hide everything from him. Am I just supposed to go through my life keeping so much of *me* a secret? So much of *my life* and what I’ve been through? It’s not *fair*”

And it’s as though Will isn’t in control of his own mind anymore. It’s as if he’s watching himself saying all of these things to Mike and he’s shouting at himself to ‘*stop talking, stop talking*’ but he doesn’t and he can’t and so many words are just *spiraling* out of his mouth and he has *no control*.

“I’ve been doubting myself constantly, been doubting *everyone* around me and I don’t know what to *do* . Everything inside my head just feels too loud and so wrong and there’s so many thoughts that I can’t control and can’t stop. And I just want it, I just *need* it, to be quiet”

He makes an attempt to calm himself, to breathe, to *think* , but he *can’t* and every word escapes his mouth so *goddamn fast*; his brain telling him -

*Go ahead, might as well ruin the only thing that makes you truly happy. Wouldn’t surprise me if you already have; you’ve obviously ruined everything else already.*

“I *hate* it , Mike” he spits out “I spend *every day* just waiting for you to tell me this was one big joke, that our relationship isn’t real, that you want to get back with El. I spend so much time not feeling good enough and as if I don’t deserve something this good; that I don’t deserve to be *this* happy” he takes a breath “And despite all your reassurances, despite all the times you tell me you love me, despite the fact that the only sure thing I see in my future is *you*, I just can’t make it make sense because why would you give up so much for me? You don’t have to do *any* of this because you’re *not like me*. You could be with a girl and not have to pretend. You could have just stayed with El. You could be *happy* and *open*.”

A beat.

“Actually why don’t I do you a favour and just *end this now*- ”

“Will you just *stop* for a second? I can’t let you do that because I’m *in* love with you ”

Suddenly it's as if he snaps back into his body, and every word they'd just said *hits* him. Mike's face is a picture almost if he wasn't quite expecting to say what he'd said. There's confusion, there's hurt but then understanding settles across his face, leaving Will even more panicked.

"You - *what?*"

Neither of them speak and Will doesn't think he's heard silence quite this loud.

"You're *in love with me?*" he repeats, looking down, not wanting to face everything he'd just said. He notices a small spider scuttling across the floor, and wishes he could run away from everything, too.

If he thinks about it, he isn't sure what he wants Mike to say. He can't quite process that someone would feel *that* way about him. Mike has told him he *loved him* multiple times since they had gotten together but Will had found it was easy to believe it was not as strong as *this*. There's a weight to Mike's words, a weight he isn't sure he can carry so he just continues to stand there and asks again.

"You're in love with me? *In love. With me?*"

He thinks back again, though this time the memories are more positive and Will can't believe he didn't see this before. Because right from the beginning, it's clear that's all Mike had ever felt. It was in little ways at first, with words and giving him his sweater but he's aware of how it evolved into bigger things. Offering to cut himself out of Will's life so Will could be happy with Nick, the slow growing touches in public, telling him that he might be ready to tell his mom about them. This whole time Mike had been wearing his heart on his sleeve, had been so ready to share his feelings since *day one*, and Will had just spent the last hour trying to dismiss all of them.

“Yeah. I am”

“ *Oh.*”

A silence again.

“How long have you-?”

“Really? You’re asking this *now* after everything you’ve just told me? You said you wanted to break up.” Mike’s voice sounds exhausted.

*I’ve ruined it.*

“I don’t,” he says quickly “I *really* don’t. I don’t know why I said it.”

“But you still did.”

*I don’t know what to do now that I’ve ruined this.*

With a sigh, Mike walks back toward the bed, sitting down in front of Will, one leg bent under himself. Hesitantly, he reaches for Will’s hand, and intertwines their fingers softly. He flinches, preparing himself for Mike to solidify their breakup, to hear him say that he thinks they should end this, too -

“How long have you been keeping all of that in?”

*Oh.*

Will finds he doesn’t think he can give him an answer. *Since everything started* is too easy as a response, because so much

happened before the Upside Down. He supposes that maybe the easier question is *how long have you not been allowing yourself to think about it?* He thinks back to how he'd felt since moving away and how for the whole family it had been seen as a new place, a *fresh start* . And it was largely - with the exception of a *connection* between himself and El. He thinks about how much he'd grown and learnt as a person and how much he'd accepted himself so fully and completely. How he now had a real family, how he was *happy*.

And how he isn't quite sure he knows what to do with that.

And maybe he's starting to think it isn't so much of a coincidence that the nightmares started getting worse and becoming more frequent just as things started to settle - as if his mind couldn't *let* him just be happy.

"Will?" Mike prompts, squeezing his hand.

Will finally looks up at him, eyebrows furrowed, conscious of his breathing being higher in his chest than usual. He can't speak, almost as if winded. He supposes this realisation probably *had* winded him in some way.

Before he can catch his breath, there's a knock again. Mike takes a glance at the door before looking back to him, almost as if asking permission. On the nod of Will's head, Mike calls out "You can come in"

Will already knows who it is, after becoming more *grounded* he'd gotten more of an idea of what was happening outside of the room-more specifically, his sister's *worried* presence standing in the hallway.

*Creepy sibling connection.*

She opens the door, takes one glance inside, noticing them both on the bed. Will assumed his face was a real eyesore right now and he knew from looking at Mike's it was just full of concern. She frowns at

them both, taking another step into his bedroom.

“Are you ok?” is all she says. It’s such a simple sentence, one he’d answered many times in his life, one that he’d been asked so many times today. He takes a breath and after all the deflection, all the fighting with himself, he finally reaches a point where he’s so sick of pretending the answer is something it isn’t.

“No” he rasps out “No I’m not.”

And then he *breaks*.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

We hoped you enjoyed this one. It's something we'd planned for Will from the very beginning - and kind of set up right back in Polyester. We really thought that it's important for Will to explore that, and how he deals with the fact that things are finally *fine*

As always though thanks for reading! Can follow us, and talk to us, both on tumblr [@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)

## 9. The bell that rings inside your mind Is challenging the doors of time.

### Summary for the Chapter:

"But, I can reassure you that every gate that we know about has been permanently closed, and we're almost certain there's no more anywhere in the world. These powers, what you can do, it's all just left over residue. We'll continue to keep an eye on all of it, and you've got to tell me the minute something changes, but I mean it when I say, things are going to be ok this time. But, you don't have to use them. Neither of you do, not if you don't want to."

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay but hold tight, because it's a long one.

As always, thanks for sticking with us, we're loving reading your comments (and some of your opinions on certain characters and certain interactions)

All we'll say is hold onto those thoughts...we've still got a little way to go yet!

We now have a playlist for this fic that we will be continuously updating throughout! You can find it [here](#) It contains all the songs that are used as chapter titles, as well as all the songs features so have a little listen and we hope you like it!

"Why didn't you come to me about all of this?" Joyce coos as she cards her fingers through Will's hair as he's led on the couch, head resting in his mom's lap. They take up the whole space and, being too tired to fight over the armchair, it leaves Mike and El to sit on the now glass free floor.

*It hurts to see him like this.*

It wasn't the first time he'd seen Will act in a way that was so unlike his usual self - after all, he didn't think he'd ever forget the events of 1984 - but to see him in so much emotional pain, to see something so *raw*, so innately *human* had been hard to deal with. If he lets himself think about it, seeing Will in such a way brought to light how much they had all been through and whether or not *they'd* actually been processing it properly themselves. After El's '*death*', his family always said that Mike was different - acting out, talking back, *graffitiing the bathroom stalls* - though at the time, he hadn't seen it for what it really was - his mind trying to find a way to process everything.

*Calling El every night for three hundred and fifty three days probably comes under that.*

He thinks about The Party, he thinks about Max, now helping Hopper clear up the glass littered around the house, and how she'd felt after Billy's death - *He was a piece of shit but he was still her brother* - and then he thinks about El, how she'd been dealt so much hurt through the whole of her life, to then lose her dad *just* when things finally seemed *right*.

So really, he couldn't blame Will for not properly processing how he feels and certainly couldn't blame him for what happened in his room.

*The things he said did hurt though.*

*A lot.*



"I thought I could handle it" Will mumbles softly. "I didn't realise how bad I was feeling"

Joyce continues to soothe, her fingers circling through his hair.

"Mrs Byers?" Max hesitantly interrupts, "Do you want me to start clearing the hallway?"

Mike understands the awkwardness Max is probably feeling. *I don't think this was on her list of plans for her "girls week" in Benton.* He shoots her a look and, as he catches her eyes, she gives him an awkward toothy grin telling him *all* he needed to know.

"No, no, it's ok sweetie. Sit down for a moment, you've been more than helpful" Joyce replies, gesturing to the armchair - El giving a small groan, the armchair dispute now resolved. Max reluctantly makes her way over, giving a quick glance to Will as she passes, before sitting in a *very un-Max* position, very carefully put together, *very poised*. Awkward.

Everything is just so *awkward*.

"Mike" El whispers next to him. His attention diverted away from Max, he turns just his head, ever so slightly, as to not draw the focus of the family. "*Are you alright?*"

"What? Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"*I heard you both talking - what you said and how you feel?*"

Great.

Mike glances over to Will for a moment, Joyce still running her fingers through his hair, their conversation now more personal, just

between them and it feels rude to try and listen in - though if he's being honest with himself, he maybe listens a little closer when he hears the name *Owens* mentioned. Hopper is hovering around the pair of them now, a disgruntled look upon his face, deflating with a huff as he looks down at the two of them. Since Will had been brought back into the living room, Hopper had made no secret over the fact that Joyce's consistent attention to him was bothering him - though Mike considers that maybe Will pointedly avoiding his dad certainly wasn't helping. He watches as Hopper begins to say something, then stops, then tries again, clenching his fist a couple of times, and *stops* once again, resigning himself to heavy handedly tapping at the back of the couch - judging by the look on his face, much to the displeasure of Will.

"So," El pulls him back from his thoughts again. "*Are you alright?*"

"*What do you think?*" Mike mutters, "*You heard what happened.*"

El says nothing more, simply squeezing his hand.

"Joyce," Hopper *finally* speaks, tone abrupt. "How is this helpful? The kid doesn't need to be babied, surely there's bigger things we need to be worrying about"

Joyce shoots him a glare "I'm worried about my son"

Hopper glares right back " *Our son*" he corrects "I'm worried, too, but we can't ignore the fact that he has powers that have come out of *nowhere* and that he thought this was that *thing* and kept it from us, from *you*, for almost two years" he pauses, gesturing toward El "They *both* did"

"Well I'll worry about that when he's not like *this* " Joyce bites, her comforting caressing of Will's hair increasing

"Well maybe-"

"Dad" El interrupts "Stop it. Both of you" she adds, looking at Joyce

"I understand why you're angry, and we're sorry but right now fighting isn't going to fix anything. It won't make Will better"

Hopper raises his hands in exasperation and with a *fine*, moves back towards the entry of the kitchen.

"Is he mad at me too?" Will speaks, looking up slightly to his mom, voice *tired*.

"What do you mean, honey? *No-one* is mad at you" She reassures.

*Don't do this here.* Mike thinks, *Please, Will. Don't do this here.*

But, Will's gaze shifts, landing on Mike for the first time since he'd led on the couch. They hadn't spoken since they were in his room and meeting his eyes hurt a lot more than Mike would care to admit.

"I don't want to break up"

"You broke up?" Joyce frowns, looking between them both.

"Did he break up with you?" Hop growls, gesturing at Mike, who feels exhausted with the fact that it's *always him* who comes across as the bad guy.

"No-" Mike tells him, because it's *true*. Despite how much their conversation hurt, he doesn't actually want to break up, either. But before he can say anything else, Will interrupts with -

"It was me. I tried to break up with Mike"

Joyce gives Mike a look of what he can only describe as pity before asking Will. "Honey, *why?*"

*Do we really need to go through the reasons again?*

"It doesn't matter." Will mutters "What does matter is I *don't want to* . Really, I *don't*" he stresses, speaking more to Mike now than to his mom.

And Mike believes that, he does - he knows that a lot of Will's words came from pent up frustration and anger at himself and the situations he'd been put in - but that doesn't take away from the fact that at the same time Mike had, though not intentionally, told him he was *in love* with him, Will had said that *as a favour* they should *end things now*.

"Look, I don't either" He admits, "But can we *please* just talk about this later?"

*Really don't want to be having this conversation in front of your parents. It's bad enough that El overheard.*

"No" Will replies, voice firm, pushing himself up from his led position, though staying close to his mom "I need to know that you really *do* know. And that you know I didn't mean it, and I'm so sorry."

*Will. Please. Later.*

"I know-"

"I don't think you do."

"Look, this seems like something you two need to talk about. If you need any space to cool down, you're more than welcome to share with El, Mike"

"No he's not" Hopper interjects, making his way back over to the couch.

“Hop-”

“It’s ok, Joyce” Mike interrupts “I’ll just sleep on the camp-”

*Shit.*

He stops himself before he can finish, but by the look on Hopper’s face, he knows the damage has been done.

“You’ll sleep where?” he growls.

“On the camp bed” Mike mutters, sheepishly.

“Isn’t that where you’ve supposed to have been sleeping this entire time?” Hopper raises an eyebrow.

“...yes”

“*Have* you been sleeping there this entire time?”

He doesn’t speak.

“Have *you* ?”

“*For God’s sake Hop* , it’s clearly obvious where he’s been sleeping but that’s *not the point*.” Joyce’s tone full of exasperation and Mike feels just a little bit grateful for the interruption.

“We had *rules*-”

“And since when has this family *ever* played by the rules?”

“It was a stupid rule, anyway” Will scoffs.

“Well of course *you’d* think that, wouldn’t you?”

“That’s *enough*” Joyce scolds “Both of you are acting like *children*. Hop, be quiet. Will, honey, I want to help you in any way I can but how you’re feeling doesn’t mean you get a free pass to act however

you want” she tells him “We are *all* hurting and like El said, shouting at each other isn’t going to help anything” she angles herself to face Mike once again, “Are you sure you’ll be ok?”

Mike nods. If he’s being honest with himself, he isn’t really sure if he will be. But there was no point in running away, because he’d have to face it at some point, anyway.

And he really wasn’t up for sharing a room with both El *and* Max.

*Well, I guess there’s only one way to find out*

“Good. Case closed” she says pointedly, staring at Hopper, who this time is wise enough to not argue.

There’s a rattling of keys at the front door, shortly followed by an ‘*I’m home*’ from Jonathan. Mike watches as he tries to turn the light, sighing when it doesn’t work.

“ *Will*, did you and El blow the electrics ag-”

Mike isn’t really sure how Jonathan didn’t notice his family staring at him as he walked through the door - he guesses it had been just as long a day at work as it had been here in the Byers home. Though, from the speed he stops himself talking, he figures that Jonathan gathers pretty quickly that this is not the time to be having this conversation.

Joyce shakes her head in disbelief “You *knew*? And didn’t tell me? ”

“Hi, Mom. Hop.” He grimaces.

“Take a seat, son” Hopper growls.

*Well, shit.*

---

“Aren’t you going to say anything?”

After a *very* awkward discussion with Jonathan, and Joyce making it very clear that with the last few bits of clearing up around the house (and the general stress of the afternoon) she would not be cooking this evening, they’d all taken a short reprise away from the living room whilst waiting for their take out to arrive. El had caught Mike by the arm as he was leaving the room, asking one final time -

“Are you sure you’re ok?”

“El, I’m fine, really. I promise”

“You can stay with me if you want to. Me and Max can share my bed” El gives a small smile, that Mike can’t help reciprocate at the gesture.

“It’s ok. Besides, don’t need another reason this evening to be in your dad’s bad books” Mike rolls his eyes, pulling out of El’s grasp. “Thank you though. I’ll come and check in with you later.”

But for now, he was in Will’s room, re-making the camp bed, *trying really hard to think of what to say* , whilst Will sits on his own bed, pinching at his fingers.

“Mike-”

“It’s fine Will. I’m glad you finally talked it all through.”

*Well, not all of it.*

“Are we ok?”

Mike sighs, turning now to face Will, still sitting, still pinching, his face a picture of anxiety. He wants to join him, as he had many times before and tell him *don't worry*. Tell him that *everything is ok*. But he can't and finds something is holding him back. There's too much still unspoken between them, too many things that can't just be ignored and brushed away by false reassurances.

“Yeah. Sure we are.” He settles on, kicking himself at being a hypocrite, and he can tell Will is clearly unconvinced.

“We are in me and you, or we as in, *us*?” Will questions, biting at his lip.

“ *Will*. We're *fine*. Just - I don't know, it's just-” Mike sighs again, “This is just a blip. A sub-concern.”

Will scans his face, eyes slightly narrowed, before letting out a breath and laying back onto his bed. He doesn't say anything more so Mike turns back to the camp-bed, fluffing out the comforter and pillows.

“Don't do that, Mike.”

Mike frowns, pillow in hand, still facing the comforter. “Don't do *what*, exactly”

“ *That* . What you're doing now. Just pretending like everything is ok but it's not.” He lets out a bitter laugh, “You didn't even want to hold my hand right before El came in. That's not *fine* . That's not *us* .”

He pauses.



"I shouldn't have said it. I shouldn't have said anything I said. Everything about El and then then all that about waiting for you to say this is a joke. It's not -" Will exhales "I can't - I know I can't take it back but, I don't - I'd been preaching to Lucas all week, well for months, how *good* it was that you're expressing who you are and then I just try to make all of that seem like you were doing this for *fun*, almost like pitying me."

Mike squints his eyes together, clutching at the pillow still in his hands. Maybe he should have taken up El's offer because, if he allows himself to think on it, *anything* else could be better than standing here right now, so unsure as to what to do, so unsure as to what to say, feeling so much and not sure how to voice any of it.

"Mike?" Will speaks again, voice a little more subdued than before, almost as if not wanting to ask his next question himself. Mike turns to face Will, still holding the pillow - now tight to his chest. "Be honest. Do you regret saying it?"

But the answer is easier than Mike expected it to be.

"Yeah."

Will doesn't look at him, his expressions very controlled but if Mike looks just that little bit harder, he notices his hands are almost bracing themselves.

"I meant it," Mike continues. *You've come this far. You've already said it. There's no point in stopping now.* "I really meant it. Because I am. But yeah, I think I do. Regret saying it, I mean."

"I don't blame you. I think I would too."

*I hate this.*

"I'm so sorry" Will murmurs after a moment, his facade breaking ever so slightly.

"It's not your fault. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Don't do that. It is my fault."

"It's *not* . You don't get to choose how you feel, Will."

"Yeah." Will's gaze finally meets Mike's eyes "Exactly. You don't."

Another pause.

"We don't have- I mean, if you were thinking- if you did want to break up, it would hurt but I think I would manage. If it was what you wanted. It's not that I can't lose you, it's more that I *don't* want to. But, you can. It's - It's ok."

Mike feels his shoulders drop "Will, I just don't know where you'd get the idea that I'd want to break up with you. Why that would be doing me a favour."

Will exhales.

"Well, besides everything I word vomited at you earlier? I'm just- I'm not used to the good things in my life actually *staying* there"

With a gulp, Mike, *finally*, makes his way over Will's bed. He sits on the edge, tapping lightly at the space next to him and Will sits up, shifting forward into it.

"Be honest with me. *This*." He gestures between the two of them "*Right now* . Is this a good thing for you?"

Will doesn't even take a second to reply, "Yes it is."

Mike sighs "Will-"

“I mean it” his voice is firm “I *really* mean it.”

Will holds his gaze, trying to convey everything he’s thinking and feeling in that one look. Mike tilts his head to the side, eyes searching Will’s, before he takes a deep breath.

“I’m worried about you, I am, and I want to make sure that you can properly work through everything. I want to be there, I want to *help* , but our relationship can’t be the only thing that does. It’s not fair on me but it’s definitely not fair on you, either. This whole thing *has* to be a two way street, otherwise it doesn’t work.”

He takes a glance down to the space between them, Will’s hand tapping against the mattress. Reminiscent of that time, half a year ago on the swing, Mike reaches across, running his fingers across the top of the back of Will’s hand, hooking his little finger with Will’s own. Will looks down, the action clearly grabbing his attention, before he turns their hands over, properly lacing their fingers together.

“We’re not breaking up. I don’t want that. I’ve never wanted that. But, I think it might be best if we take things a little slower - have a little space. I’ll go back on the camp bed, we’ll *maybe* cut back on the PDA, but really we’ll just relax. We’ve got all the time in the world; there’s no rush.”

Will’s eyes dart from their hands, back up to Mike, and he watches as a smile begins to form on his face. “That’s good” he says “Means I might actually get some of the comforter to myself for once”

“Oh sorry, *Mr. ‘Wanna Break the Rules* ”

There’s a slight pause before they both softly chuckle. Will takes his hand out of Mike’s own, lifting his arms up around Mike’s neck, interlocking them and pulling him in.

“Thank you” Will tells him, tone muffled by Mike’s shoulder, but sincere “For *everything*. ”

Mike wraps his arms around Will’s waist, taking comfort in the contact. “Anytime. We’ll get through this. *You’ll* get through this.

We've all faced monsters most people couldn't even imagine and we *lived*. This is a cakewalk."

"Somehow, this feels worse than any of that. The monsters were scary but this is so-" He hums, trying to think of the word, but taps lightly against the side of Mike's head instead.

"I know. But I believe in *you* , Will Byers."

And Will nestles in a little further.

There's a silence for a little while, more comfortable and less awkward than any other moments of quiet from earlier that day, so Mike allows himself to revel in it. Sitting there, Will in his arms, as he properly processes everything that had happened.

*You're in love with him.*

And for the first time today, Mike smiles at the thought.

"Mike," Will says slowly pulling back a little "I want you to know that I'm in-"

Mike immediately interrupts once he realises what Will is going to say "Don't say it. Not yet"

Will frowns "Why not?"

"Because I want you to say it when you're feeling better, and not in response to all of this. And when you do, when you're *ready* , I'll say it back, properly this time"

"Ok." he pauses. "So, do you want to listen to *How Deep Is Your Love*,

then?”

“Absolutely *not*.”

Will snorts before pausing again “Well, can I kiss you instead?”

“I thought we just agreed to be taking it slow.” but he’s smiling slightly

“We agreed on less PDA. Last I checked no one else is here,” Will shoots back, dramatically looking around the room, “so technically-”

“Will?” he interrupts.

“Yeah?”

“*Shut up.* ”

And he closes their gap once more, pressing his lips against Will’s.

---

**Thursday 2nd July 1987. Benton, Illinois**

“Ok. *Get up, we’re going out.*”

With a groan, El pulls the cover higher over her head. She hadn’t had a particularly restful night sleep - It being a late night anyway, and by the time herself and Max headed back to her room, their minds were racing and neither were ready to *shut off* for the night. This, in combination with the fact that Will was obviously having his own restless night, struggling to keep his emotions in check to the point where at random intervals during the early hours of the morning, each and everyone of those thoughts, and feelings, was sent to El, was *also* not helping; for the first time in two years, El considers that

she wished more than anything that this *connection*, the thing that had brought them closer together, had *never* existed.

Now, El just wanted to *rest*.

“El. Get up” she feels a tugging on the comforter.

“Go away, Max” she groans “I’m tired. I need to sleep. No.”

There’s an *exaggerated* sigh and, before El can react, the comforter is removed, revealing a smug looking Max, already beginning to fold the sheet, preventing El from pulling it back.

“ *We -*” Max gestures between the two of them, “- are getting away. Away from the drama, away from the boys and away from this house.”

“Are we coming back?” El hesitantly asks, frowning

“Well, *obviously!*” Max responds, now pulling at El’s arm, “I’ve already checked with your mom to see if she wanted to come because she’s taking the day off, but she’s got a few errands to run after dropping your dad at work. So, *get up* .”

And that’s how El found herself, Max on her arm, walking down Benton high street towards the diner.

“There’s more to do at home than in town,” El admits, gaze low, “Maybe we should just go back-”

Max stops to a halt, pulling El back slightly “Um, *no*.” she lets go of her arm, placing her hands on her hips. “We are *not* going home. *You* need a break.”

"I don't need a break."

"El, you barely slept last night."

"So surely that means I should be home. *Sleeping.*"

"Nice try" Max says dryly "If we go home, you know you won't be sleeping because of Will."

"He's my *brother-* "

"Yeah, he is. But *you're* just as important." Max assures, though El isn't convinced, giving her an unsure look. "Besides, Mike has it covered right?"

*I think so?* When Mike had come into her room to check in last night, he'd reiterated the fact that he was fine, but, as El had heard the conversation between him and Will and could feel her brother's emotions all night, she was still questioning if Mike being *fine* wasn't entirely true.

"Right." Is what she settles on, half-heartedly agreeing.

"Hey, look," Max, sighs "Let's just get some breakfast and *then* we can talk about things that aren't about your brother *or* Mike." Max hooks her arm with El's once again and they continue on to the diner.

As expected, Max's suggestion of talking about things that *aren't* Will or Mike related doesn't last long. From the moment they sit, their order taken by a waitress El hadn't seen working at the diner before - introducing herself as Cordelia, with a soft British accent - the topic of conversation had become *exactly* that.

"He shouldn't have spoken to you in that way." Max says, watching the waitress walk towards the kitchen, flicking through the sheets she'd written their order on. "I understand what he's going through, I really do - we *all* do - but that doesn't give him the right to blame you for something *he asked* you to do. What if it was the -" she lowers her voice, glancing around "- the *you know what?* What then?"

El hums, a sad smile on her face “It’s fine. Will is *complicated*. ”

“Yeah? And so are *all of us*. We’ve all been through it, *you’ve* been through it. But *you* don’t talk to us like we’re garbage.”

*Well, I’ve heard that before.*

“It’s not about me right now”

“ *Bullshit*. You’re the one that had to do a lot of the hard work - you’re the one who had to see what was going on in Will’s mind. You’re *just* as important in all of this” Max sighs. “Did anyone even check on you to see how you were doing last night?”

El shrugs, looking over towards the kitchen to see if there was any progress on their food. “Mom, Dad and Jonathan did. And you know Mike did, too.”

“But Will didn’t? Not even through your connection?”

*Of course he didn’t.*

El completely understood why Will didn’t, with everything going on, this wouldn’t be on his list of priorities - *and he made it clear before I looked, what, or who, his main priority was*. But she couldn’t deny that it had hurt a little that, even after he had *calmed* slightly, she had done everything to make sure he was ok but he had not done the same for her.

“He had a lot on his mind” she mumbles eventually.

Max opens her mouth to respond but, before she can, Cordelia is back at the table, food and drink in hand. Placing their order in front of them - albeit giving each other’s order to the wrong person - and a



few parting words of “*Let me know if you need anything else*” she leaves them to their breakfast. Their waitress out of view, El and Max switch plates, though not before Max takes a sip of El’s milkshake (“*Knew I should have got that flavour*”)

El gives a small smile before absentmindedly stirring her drink with a straw, Max continuing with her interrupted conversation.

“Again. *Bull. Shit.* So did you. He should have checked in. If Wheeler can spare a moment away from his *other half* to check, so can Will.”

El shrugs again leaning down and taking a sip of milkshake.

Rolling her eyes, Max leans across the table and pushes El’s knife and fork towards her. “Ok. C’mon. We’re here. In this *very* empty diner that definitely has way more staff than they actually need and we’re going to eat our food. And while we’re doing that, we’re going to stop thinking and talking about *stupid boys.*”

El gives pause before smiling again. She picks up the knife and fork, stabbing into her pancake.

“Yeah, no more talking about *stupid boys*”

Max grins back at her.

---

“Fancy meeting you here” El hears about twenty minutes later, just as she’s taken her final mouthful of pancake. She looks up, swallowing immediately and answering with a quick “*Hi*” smiling at a *very* familiar face.

Max clears her throat, momentarily gaining back El’s attention. She’s giving her a peculiar look, holding her, second, milkshake in both hands, and taking a long sip. El pointedly ignores her, instead shuffling over and asking “Do you want to sit with us?”

“Sure” he shrugs “I just came in for a coffee after my run, but I can stay a while”

El beams up at him, sliding her plates and drink across the table, briefly catching Max’s eye and receiving an eyebrow raise in return.

*I guess the not talking about ‘stupid boys’ rule isn’t going to last very long.*

“Who’s your friend, El?” Max says, resting her chin in her palms after taking another sip of strawberry milkshake, watching as he sits down, reaching across El to grab the dessert menu. (*“I may as well treat myself if I’m here, right?”*)

“Oh,” She replies, slightly disoriented by the question “This is Nick. Nick, this is Max, my best friend.”

“ *Oh*” Max drawls, smirking.

*Stop.*

“So glad to *finally* meet you” El kicks Max under the table.

“You’re friends with Will too then, huh?” Nick gives her a sheepish smile.

“Well, right now we’re a *bit* annoyed at Will (*“Max, stop”*) but yeah, we’re friends.”

“I can’t imagine Will making people annoyed at him - well, not *completely* intentionally. What happened?”

El sighs, looking over at Nick, simply stating “Shared trauma”

“ *Right*. Always with the shared trauma-”

“ No. This time it’s *their* shared trauma, mainly Will’s. So, not *shared* but it’s between Will and Mike.” El hears Max scoff “I have my own. Just not *that* shared trauma. I think. Not completely.”

“ *Right* ,” Nick says, giving El a confused look which quickly turns to concern, “Wait. Is Will ok? Did they break up?”

“No.” El says defensively, her tone causing Nick to raise his eyebrow. She clenches and unclenches her fist before continuing “Really, they didn’t. It’s just that Will is having a hard time and he’s kept some secrets because of it, but, he’s *ok* , or, he will be. Mike is with him now and I know he’ll make sure of that.”

“That’s good” Nick smiles, and the sincerity of it knocks El a little unsteady “And are *you* ok? You know, with *your* shared trauma”

Max snorts into her milkshake. Not taking her eyes away from Nick, El kicks her again.

“It’s been hard” she admits “But I will be, too”

“I *did* tell her earlier, *multiple times*, that she was just as important as Will in all of this.” Max’s sincere tone dramatised “Don’t you agree, Nick?”

“You don’t have to answer her.”

Though if El lets herself consider it, just for a moment, she thinks that she wouldn’t mind if he did.

“Well, *of course* she is - *you* are. Don’t let whatever is going on with Will make you think you are any less important. I know you have your friends, and your parents and you probably can’t tell me *much* anyway, but if you ever need an ear, you know where to find me. If you wanted that.”

And El just *smiles*.

She does want to take him up on that, she has since they ran into each other at this very diner during Spring Break. But El can't help but think of *Will* and how he'd feel, how he *has* been feeling. He had said, that day in the cafeteria, that he was glad she had a friend though the more she thinks about his actions after, El isn't sure how true that statement *actually* was. But when it comes down to it, the more she spoke with Nick, regardless of Will's reluctance on the matter, the more she realised that *she* was glad that she had a friend too.

"Thank you." El smiles "I'd like that. A lot."

"Me too" He replies, reciprocating. He looks at her for just a little bit longer than he normally would, smile still on his face before Max jolts him out of it.

"Well aren't you just the *nicest*. No wonder your dad likes him, El"

"Everyone knows about that, huh?"

"My dad doesn't think many people are *downright pleasant*." El mumbles.

"Right" he says before pausing, a thoughtful look on his face "Hey, have you got any plans next week? I was wondering if maybe you wanted to do something, Me and you?" another pause "Oh, and Will and Mike of course. You too, Max, if you're still here." he adds hurriedly.

Max gives El a smug look before turning to face Nick "*Unfortunately*, as much as I would absolutely *love* to be around to witness that-" El kicks at her *again*, Max swiftly dodging it this time "I'm actually leaving Sunday, but *Mike* is staying for a few more weeks and I'm just *positive* they'd both love to tag along with you two."

El thinks she might hate her. Just a little bit.

“You don’t have to, if you’re busy-”

“No, no I’d like that - we would. I’ll ask Will when I get home”

“Cool.” He pauses again, “But if Will’s busy, or - I dunno, Mike’s decided he *still* doesn’t like me - we could still do something? If you wanted?”

*I do. I really really do.*

“Yes.” she smiles “Sounds nice.”

The rest of their breakfast is uneventful, consisting of small talk between the three of them and El receiving a barrage of smirks from Max whenever Nick wasn’t looking. Despite the bundle of nerves that had settled in her stomach - born from worries of how Will was going to react - she found that she felt more excited than she had in a while at the prospect of hanging out with Nick, hanging out with a *friend* . Someone that was so far detached from everything that had happened in her life. She tried not to let her thoughts show on her face *too* much, resting her fist against her face, concealing her smile.

*Maybe I really do deserve to put myself first, sometimes. If it makes me this happy.*

“I’ll call you later then?” Nick asks a little while later, as they walk out of the doors of the diner, bell ringing behind them “You know, to make arrangements?”

El nods, grinning up at him and giving a simple “Sounds good. Usual time?”

“On the dot.”

They part ways there on the street, their houses being in different directions and when Nick is finally out of earshot, Max turns to her, a gleam in her eye.

“Well,” she starts “ *Someone’s* been keeping secrets”

---

“Guess who *we* saw today!” Max throws open the front door, causing Mike to stir from his very uncomfortable nap on the couch. He shifts, wrapping himself tightly in the blanket draped over himself.

“Can you keep it down?” He murmurs, “I’ve had two hours sleep.”

“Ok? So why are you not sleeping somewhere more like, I don’t know, the bed you’ve been illegally sleeping in for the past week?”

“ *Hilarious*” Mike rolls his eyes, pulling the blanket over his head, voice now muffled “Will needed to rest. He’s in there and I’m out here. So, *leave*.”

“ *Nope* , because guess what? El has a *date*.”

And suddenly, Mike feels very awake.

“ *You* have a *date*?” Mike asks.

“It’s *not* a *date*. ” El protests.

“ *It’s* a *date*.” Max grins.

She moves towards the armchair, flopping down, smile not leaving her face once.

“Sorry Wheeler, guess you missed your chance. El has a new guy in her life now, time to move on.”

Mike raises an eyebrow “Max. I have a *boyfriend*. I think we’re ok on the moving on part.”

And Mike is. He really is. And he loves Will more than he could care to admit given the circumstances of the last couple of days. But Mike wonders if maybe, he’d been so wrapped up in *those* feelings and his relationship that maybe he hadn’t considered how *he* feels at the prospect of El moving on. He doesn’t want to be with her again and he knows it’s selfish thought; Mike will admit that when he and Will had got together, though they have spoken about it since, he hadn’t really considered El’s initial reaction, and he wonders if *maybe* it felt similar to this.

But for the first time, since their breakup half a year ago, there’s a strange sense of *finality* to everything. That the chapter of his, and her, life that was simply just *Mike and El* was coming to a close.

“You went out for breakfast.” Mike sits up, making room for El on the couch, distracting himself from those thoughts “How does that even happen?” She sits down next to him, playing with her hands, something that he knows from years of knowing her as a nervous habit.

“It’s not a date. You’re invited.”

“I’m invited? Why am *I* invited?”

“Well, not just you. Will is too.”

“It’s a *double date*” Max smirks

Mike shoots Max a glare.

“Who would know us, to invite us both-”

And then it clicks.

“ *Oh.*”

“Wait, wait.” Max, leans forward in the armchair, arms splayed out in front of her, “You *knew* about this? How did you know about this?” She turns to El “Wheeler found out about your new boyfriend before I did? I’m supposed to be your best friend”

“Max, he’s *not* my boyfriend. We just call sometimes. To Talk. He’s my friend. There was nothing to tell.”

“Then *why* does *Mike* know?”

“Well. Guess we know who she trusts *more* then” Mike responds, smugly.

“Why has this turned into a fight? He’s *not* my boyfriend and it’s *not* a date”

“Who’s not your boyfriend?”

Everyone turns to face Will who had appeared in the entryway. Mike notices that Will looks like he normally does in the mornings; hair ruffled, voice croaky and eyes heavy. *I guess moving to the couch was the right decision* , Mike thinks, and he’s glad that even if his nap was rudely interrupted by Max, at least one of them got some sleep.



Though, what takes precedent in his mind is the abrupt tone to his voice, despite the hoarseness of it, and Mike braces himself for the inevitable fallout.

Will yawns - Mike resists the urge to do the same - and rubs at his eyes before asking again.

“Who’s not your boyfriend?”

“Will!” Mike says in lieu of anyone answering the question. “You’re awake”

“Yeah.” Will frowns before turning to El “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No,” El insists “Max has it all wrong”

“Yeah!” Max interjects upon a glare from El “I was just trying to wind up Wheeler (“*Gee, thanks*”) Nick isn’t *actually* El’s boyfriend-”

“ *Nick* ” Will replies, frown deepening “Why are you all talking about Nick?”

“We saw him in town” El replies “He asked to go bowling”

”So, he asked you on a *date*?” Will rolls his eyes

“No. All of us. Me, you, Mike. Even Max. I said I’d ask you”

Will says nothing, a blank expression falling over his face. Mike considers that this, his reaction, will go one of two ways and, in this moment, he thinks that maybe it’ll be the least forgiving of the two. Max clearly realises too, her previous joyful attitude sobering up as she bites at her cheek in an attempt not to grimace.

And, despite everything they’d all been through since 1983, Mike thinks that maybe, *this week* has been the *longest week* of his life.

“No.”

“Will, come on, it could be fun-” Mike tries, gesturing towards Max in an attempt to get her to agree.

“No. I’m not going bowling with my boyfriend, my *ex* -boyfriend and my sister, who is *my* boyfriend’s *ex* -girlfriend. It’ll be some weird double date. I’m not going.”

*Well, he’s not entirely wrong there.*

“But you wanted to be friends with him.” El responds, and Mike notices that she sounds a little *hurt* “You told me that, you told *him* that.”

“And I *do*,” Will stresses, “but this *thing*,” he aimlessly moves his hands “-and with *everything* going on right now. *No*.”

“This *thing* is just you going bowling with friends. I don’t understand.”

“All you need to understand is that I’m not going. Look, I came out here for a drink, not relationship drama” he shakes his head “Nevermind, I’m going back to bed” and he turns, and makes his leave down the hallway, *without a drink* , loudly closing his bedroom door.

*Silence.*

Mike looks between El and Max, neither wanting to meet his eyes.

He sighs.

“I’ll go.” and he heaves himself off the couch.

---

“Will-”

“I’m not in the mood and I’m not going” Will mutters before Mike can finish his sentence. Will stands, back to the bedroom door, shrugging on a sweater - Mike’s sweater - before making his way back to his bed and climbing in.

“Nice sweater” Mike points out.

“ *Not* in the mood” But there’s a slight jesting tone to Will’s voice.

Mike walks over to Will’s side of the bed, nudging his foot with his knee. Will begrudgingly shuffles over and Mike sits down opposite him.

“So, why don’t you want to go bowling?”

“I just told you” Will mutters “It’ll be weird. Surely *you* of all people can see why this is weird.”

“Yeah it is. It really is but it’s only going to get weirder the longer we put this off. We all know Nick isn’t my favourite person but it might be fun *and* it might be good to just get out for a while. Something to look at besides Hopper’s face glaring at us 24/7”

“Just why *him*? Why does she want to date him?” Will sighs “Me and you - we were *friends first* - we have a *history* . El only knows Nick because he used to be *my boyfriend*, ” he pauses, playing with the sleeves of the sweater, “and they say they’re friends, that we’re *all* friends but then why didn’t she tell me that they spoke? Every part of their friendship was kept a secret until I *accidentally* found out. The day in the cafeteria, he comes over to the table because *she’d* asked him to, because they *speak* , despite me asking him to join us so many times before. And *then*, I find out that *you* knew that they *talk* , that she’d spoken to you about it but not me, and now they’re doing *this*?”

Mike raises an eyebrow “Ok, but I *did* say to you that you should speak to El about it. Look, Will, if you’re so worried about this being a date, why aren’t you going bowling? Isn’t that just letting *this*

happen?”

“I thought there was nothing *to* let happen?”

“*There’s not* but would it be so bad if there was?

“Yes, because it proves that what I said in the cabin was *right*. That he got to know my family, got to know *El*, then broke up with me and *upgraded*.” Will looks down and sighs, muttering under his breath “Once again, *second best*.”

Mike feels slight *indignation* at Will’s words and knows this needs to be cleared up before it can fester any further.

“Ok” he starts, “First of all, think about what *I did* last Christmas. I had a *girlfriend*, realised I liked you, broke up with her *because* I liked you and from the *moment* I really let myself work through all those thoughts and feelings in my head it was obvious that it couldn’t be *anyone else*. You’re worried about being second best, but you’re not, not to me-”

“Mike-”

“Let me finish.” Mike holds up his hand “You’re *always* going to be my first option. I told you that before. I know it might not have seemed like that in the past and I *know* you’re dealing with a lot but can you *please* can you try not to undermine my feelings, at least? After everything I’ve told you yesterday, it feels like you’re still doing that.”

Will pulls a little more at the sleeves of the sweater but stays silent.

“Besides, this isn’t just weird for you. Regardless of who knew who first, our relationship - as much as she doesn’t want to actually tell

me outright - *was* weird for El at the start. Look, this whole thing with Nick, yeah I get it, he's your *ex-boyfriend* but think about how this must feel for me. It's *El*. Me and El, we're done, I don't want to be with her again, but whether you like it or not, she is my ex-girlfriend and there will always be a history there. It's not that I never expected her to move on, but realising it *will happen* is a little weird. I didn't *expect* it to feel weird but it does and I think we all need to come to terms with all of this, we all need to *talk* about this because it's going to make everything worse if we don't."

Will still doesn't look up at him, a hardened expression on his face almost as if he's trying to ignore Mike's words. Mike catches the moment he falters, his eyebrows turning up for a second before lowering again. His face softens as he finally looks up at Mike - a look of resignation on his face.

"It's just been *hard*" is what Will says "A lot of things have been and hearing this just really isn't helping - just as I'm trying to make sense of what's happening, what *you're* saying, *everything* . I want to sort through it all in my head and *get better* . I've not been the best toward you with all of this, I haven't been since before we moved, but I promise I *am* trying. I know it doesn't seem like it, especially with *everything* I just said about El and Nick, but I *am* . I promise."

Will's still fidgeting with the sleeves of the sweater - Mike noting that the more he spoke the more agitated the movement had become. Mike *knows* he's trying, that action alone speaking louder than what had been said that day and, as much as he would like it to be, Mike knows full well this isn't something that will get better overnight.

*And the timing of the El and Nick revelation really hasn't helped.*

He reaches forward, lightly holding onto Will's wrists until his hands still. Then, slowly, he tugs at the sleeves and pulls them down so that they're no longer covering his hands, folding the cuffs over once they finally reach his wrists.

He holds on for a little longer, an idea coming into his mind.

*Let's see if I still remember.*

It's a short, but slow pattern, Mike taking extra time to make sure that everything was correct. Though not without a few slip ups, presses in places where taps should have been -

Will smiles at him anyway.

"So," Mike starts, placing Will's hands back down onto the bed, "why are you wearing my winter sweater in the middle of summer?"

"My sweater. You gave it to me."

"Well you didn't *really* give me much of a choice."

Will rolls his eyes.

"*But*, being the good boyfriend that *I* am, I didn't ask for it back, unlike *some people*" Mike smirks "You know, I don't think Nick broke up with you so *he* could upgrade, I think he broke up with you so *you* could upgrade."

"*Shut up* " Will rolls his eyes, playfully kicking Mike's leg. They both laugh, and it's a small moment but it gives Mike an overwhelming realisation that *they're going to be ok*. He knows that Will is working through a lot right now, but he also knows that no matter how hard it gets, he's in this for the long haul.

There's a small knock at the door and after Will's call of '*Come in!*' it opens, Joyce poking her head around before walking into the room.

“Afternoon, honey”

“Hi, Mom” He smiles “Did you get all your errands done?”

She nods, smiling back “Took a little longer than I was expecting but it was nice to have the time to catch up on them. How are you feeling?”

“Better.”

Joyce raises an eyebrow.

“Better than *yesterday*, at least.” Will concedes. “You really didn’t need to take the day off. ”

“Yes I did and you can bet I’ve taken the rest of the week off, too.”

“Mom-”

“I don’t want to hear another thing about it” she scolds, though her tone is anything but.

“Can we afford it? I don’t want you losing money because of me” Will says quietly.

A sad smile appears on her face as she makes her way over to the bed. Mike moves over, settling next to Will, so Joyce can sit on the end of the bed. She reaches forward and takes Will’s hand.

“We’ll be fine. We *are* fine. You don’t need to worry about anything like that anymore. Besides, you’re much more important than money. You *always* come first.”

*Will really is being told that a lot today, Mike thinks. Maybe if he hears it enough, he’ll realise that’s true.*

“So,” Joyce, with one last squeeze, lets go of Will’s hand, clasping her own together, “better than yesterday, huh? Mike, is that true?”

"Yeah, I guess?" Mike shrugs, not really wanting to be dragged into this. "He woke up late. But so did I really. If El and Max weren't being so loud then we probably would have still been asleep when they got back from breakfast."

"If it hadn't been for El's stupid date with Nick, you mean." Will mutters bitterly before he can help it, Mike noticing the moment that he's realised what he's said. He shoots Mike a quick apologetic glance before making a point of avoiding eye contact with his mom.

Joyce raises her eyebrows "El has a date?" A pause "Nick? *Your* Nick?"

"He's not *my* Nick." Will interjects "But yeah, that one"

"*And*, it's not a date," Mike snaps. It's irrational, he knows it is, but Mike still doesn't like the association. Doesn't like that way he's so involved. Doesn't like the way he's *still*, almost a year later, *Will's* Nick. "Max was just being Max"

"Right," Joyce says slowly, looking between the two of them, "If you're sure." Another pause. When neither of them say anything, she continues, "Anyway, that thing we talked about, me calling Owens? He said he can come tomorrow - just to check in, see if we can figure out where all of this has come from."

To Mike's surprise, Will doesn't protest. Instead he nods and Mike wonders if, despite the humour of *creepy sibling connection*, playing around with the lights and the many evenings that Will used to tell him, over the phone that him and El had been testing things out to see what they could do, maybe Will had been worried about these powers for a lot longer than just Spring Break. He knew he was apprehensive before Christmas, but Will had become more casual about it, more blasé; that day in January, in Mike's basement, comes to mind as they showed off a new trick with the lights that he and El had discovered. He wouldn't say this to Will, to *anyone*, because he knows he wasn't ready to, but he can't help but think that if Will *had* voiced this sooner, all of this could have been avoided, and with everything that had happened, Mike wishes he had.

"What time will he be here?" Will asks. He goes to fiddle with the



sleeves of the sweater again before stopping himself.

“Around one, could be a little later. He has an appointment in the morning so said he’d come when he’s finished” Joyce says.

“Well. You know it’s bad when you get a next day appointment, *and* it’s a home visit.”

“It doesn’t mean it’s *bad*, baby, just that none of us really understand *that place*, and we want to make sure these powers are the *only* thing left over from it.”

“Wouldn’t mind knowing how they work, too” Mike mutters.

Joyce smiles at him “Exactly,” she says, before slapping the mattress with a ‘*right*’ and pushing herself off the bed. “I’m going to make a late breakfast, I know that El and Max have already had something but are you boys hungry?”

Will shrugs, “I could eat.”

“Me too,” He shuffles off of the bed, “I’ll help.”

“I can too-”

“No,” Mike stops Will, “you rest, I’ll bring you something back in.” He pauses “Try not to mess up the sleeves of my sweater while I’m gone though. I’ve only got so many to give away”

Will rolls his eyes, though smiling, and reiterates “*My sweater.*”

And Mike follows Joyce out of the room.

They’ve been in the kitchen for about ten minutes, Mike helping Joyce with getting the ingredients for their breakfast ready (“*I got the stuff for homemade waffles*” Joyce had said “*Might as well make the most of my day off*”) when she finally caves and asks him.

“So, how are *you* doing, sweetheart?” It’s said in a casual tone, but Mike can hear the concern laced underneath.

“Yeah,” he replies, as he measures out the flour “I’m fine. I’m doing great”

There’s a beat before Joyce replies with a casual, “Ok, then.” taking the flour from Mike and handing him the sugar to measure instead.

A pause.

“Well, it’s more that it’s hard to know how to help.” Mike pauses. “And hearing things that have been said.” And again. “And then knowing what *I’ve* said.” Once more. “But I am fine, it’s just - it’s not *exactly* how I expected this summer to be.”

Once he starts talking, he can’t *stop*. Normally he’d have told her he was fine and left it there, but there is something so assuring about Joyce that it makes you feel like she can make everything ok.

“No, I imagine it’s not” she comments “Especially since the three week trip to Chicago that I’ve been consistently lying to Karen about isn’t happening”

Mike gives her a sheepish grin “Yeah, sorry about that. Again.”

“It’s ok. After everything these last couple of years, lying to Will’s friends parents has become pretty standard. I don’t mind it so much when I’m lying about something that makes him happy for once”

*Yeah, he thinks, I suppose it has.*

“Though, maybe you and Will could still go sometime? To Chicago. If that’s something you both still wanted to do?”

Mike thinks it's very clear what she's implying.

"Yeah, we still want to." Mike feels his face flush a little, "Well, maybe not three weeks in Chicago but yeah, that's something we'd still want to do. There's lots of things that we want to do, that we *will* do"

"Good" Joyce smiles, "Regardless, you're always welcome here, Mike. Whatever you need, whenever you need it, you can come here, to us, to *me*."

Mike hears the echo of his mom saying the same thing, but he's always thought that when she said it it felt rehearsed, like it was something she was expected to say. But when Joyce said it, it was written all over her face that she meant every single word. He feels a huge surge of *warmth* settle over him.

"Thanks, really."

"It's no trouble, it's never been any trouble. *Especially* since you call me Joyce now," Mike snorts at her words, "I've been trying to get you to do that since you were five, but apparently it just took you dating my son to get you to do that"

"I just wanted to be polite, Mrs Byers"

"Smartass" she points at him, smirking. He grins at her. "You are good for each other, though" her tone is more serious now "You and Will. I mean, you always have been, but this-" she gestures vaguely between him and the doorway "it's really good."

"Hopper doesn't seem to think so" he mumbles, she rolls her eyes

"At this point, I think Hop just enjoys poking fun. Why don't you let me focus on him and you focus on you and Will" she smiles at him again. "Now, pass me those eggs."

---

**Friday July 3rd 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

“Sir Will, it’s been a while.”

Will turns towards the front door to see Dr. Owens, and his mom, walking towards him. It’s nearly half one when he finally arrives, carrying a few bags, his mom carrying another two, placing them down on the coffee table in front of him. With a sigh, his mom comes up behind Will on the couch, placing two hands on his shoulders giving them a reassuring squeeze.

“Sorry I’m a little late.” Owens says, dusting off his jacket “You might be living in a small town here but apparently traffic, well, it’s still a nightmare.”

Will looks up towards his mom, giving her a small smile.

“Ok, honey” His mom says, “I’m going to be next door if you need me, just give me a shout.”

He nods, “Where’s everyone else?”

“Well, El is in her room just in case-” she trails away at the end of her sentence, looking over at Owens who nods in response.

“From what you’ve told me, it might be a good idea to test how this whole thing works,” He says, before turning his attention back to Will, “but we’ll only call in her if and when we need her. It’s just going to be us.”

*Just us.* Will thinks, the thoughts that had been spiralling around his head since he found out Owens was coming, making their way to the forefront. *I could say something and it would be just us.*

His mom squeezes Will's shoulders again, "Mike and Max are in your room, if you need them" She leans forward just a little, and in a whispered tone, just so that he could hear, she says "I think Mike's a bit worried"

Will snorts "He must be if he's willingly hanging out with Max."

She softly kisses the top of his head, before pulling back. "You sure you're going to be ok?"

"*Yes, mom*" Will insists, shrugging out of her hold, "I'll be ok, *really* . I'm really kind of used to appointments now"

She stalls before giving him one final kiss on the top of his head, followed by a ruffle of his hair. Will frowns, knowing she can't see. He hears a small '*ok*' before *finally*, his mom makes her way out of the living room, leaving Will and Owens, alone.

*Just us.*

"So, Will, run through this with me. How does it all work?"

---

"*You*, have a coffee problem"

Mike stops his pacing and pulls the mug away from his face, swallowing the mouthful he'd just taken. He looks over to Max, who's sitting cross legged on the camp bed flicking through a magazine.

"You've seen me drink coffee *twice* ."

"Twice more than I have."

He flips her off with his free hand, “Well maybe, I have a more *mature* palette than you.”

Max scoffs and mumbles something he can’t quite pick out under her breath.

They’d been in Will’s room for ten minutes at this point, conversation between them being far and few between, little more than small talk - which was certainly not helped by Mike’s pacing of the room. He knew this was something that Will had to do alone - even if Owens himself *hadn’t* requested it, *space* was something that he himself had suggested when he and Will spoke two days again in the aftermath of El’s *searching* - but Mike found that all he wanted was to be *out there*.

And the fact that El had been *conveniently* separated from himself and Max, certainly wasn’t doing any favours for how he was feeling either.

“I’m just *stressed*.” Mike mutters, taking another sip of his coffee - *maybe she’s right. I do this a lot* - “Are you not stressed?”

“Evidently, not as stressed as you are” She loudly flicks to the next page, Mike narrowing his eyes at the sound. “You know, if you’re as stressed as you say, neither coffee nor pacing is going to help with that.”

“You know what *definitely* isn’t going to help? *You*.”

“Ok,” she says, placing the magazine down on her lap, raising her hands in defence “Just because there’s trouble in paradise doesn’t mean you have to take it out on me-”

“I’m not taking *anything* out on you because there’s no trouble. I’m just *thinking*. There’s a lot on my mind”

“Tell me about it. Didn’t exactly sign up for this on my week away from Hawkins.” Max rolls her eyes as she picks up the magazine from her lap, closes it and places it on the floor next to her. “But they’ll be

alright, *he'll* be alright,” she pauses, “so can you stop pacing, take a magazine and *sit down already*”

---

“And this feeling, that you say you get sometimes with El, how would you describe it?”

“It’s almost like - it’s almost as if - it’s hard to describe.”

Will’s laying on the couch now, Owens sitting beside him, making notes and occasionally looking over at his *brain activity machine* , observing the moments and changes occurring. He hasn’t missed this, the tests, the machines, *the questions* and Will makes a point of looking away from the apparatus, focussing on himself.

“It’s like,” he tries again, “I can feel it at the back of my neck. It starts small, before it spreads and then it’s more of a feeling, *everywhere* . I feel what El feels, she feels what I feel; like we’re connected. It used to remind me of *Him*, it didn’t start long after everything that happened at Starcourt and I could feel when he was around, when he was activated.”

“And what was that like?”

The machine whirs, Will squinting his eyes at the sound.

“ *Cold.* ” he takes a breath, “I still had that feeling on the back of my neck but it was more threatening. I think I said before, it’s like I’m frozen and like I don’t know what to do. Like *He* wants me to be afraid, but with El it isn’t like that. It’s similar, but I’m not as scared of it. Eventually I even started to like it a little”

“And do you feel how she feels, *all* the time?”

“No. Well - it depends. If I think about it, it started after she got bitten-”

“Bitten?” Owen questions

“By *Him*. She was bitten the same day as everything went down at the mall. We got it out of her, but her powers were gone” Will pauses, getting the topic back on track. “Her powers started coming back as soon as we discovered we could do this. At first we had to *tap in* but then one day it was like a dam had burst and I, *we*, just felt everything *all the time*. But I can block her out. I can turn the connection on and off when I need to. I don’t know if El can - she’s never told me if she has done it before.”

Will briefly looks over to Owens once again, watching him scrawl notes into his notebook.

“I know what it sounds like” Will rushes, almost as if realising what he’d implied. Owens narrows his eyes at him, “I know sounds *bad*.” *Say something. Now’s your chance.* “but it’s not.” *Missed it.* “Or least that’s what El said. She checked.”

*That* gets Owens attention. He stalls, putting the notebook and pen on the coffee table and leans forward with a sigh. Owens rubs at his eyes, fingers trailing down his cheeks, before looking back up at Will, simply saying -

“And *when* did you do this?”

“Three days ago, maybe? She’s done it before-”

“But that doesn’t mean it’s *safe*, Will”

“Look, I’ve heard this from my mom, and my dad - *and everyone* - I really don’t need to hear this again. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

Owens sighs “Not yet, we still have a few things to discuss. So, what *exactly* did she find?”



---

“So. *In love* with him, huh?”

Mike puts down the magazine, he hadn't been reading it anyway, and takes one of the pillows off of Will's bed, lifting his arm and aiming for Max's head. She deflects, and they both fight over the pillow for a few seconds before Max reigns supreme, hitting his arm with a “*ha!*”. He shoots her another glare as they both settle back down from the momentary excitement.

“I am happy for you, though” Max says after a small bout of silence “You deserve it. Both of you.”

Mike gives her a sheepish smile “It wasn't the way I was planning on telling him, but, thanks.”

“You had a plan?” she raises an eyebrow, and from the looks of it tries to stifle a smirk.

“No. I didn't. I hadn't really thought about it” he admits, rubbing the back of his neck, and tries to work up the nerve to show what it was he *did* think about. Finally, he reaches into his trouser pocket, holding out the two badges “I do have these, though.”

Max stands from the camp bed, walking over to where Mike was situated, looking down at his palm. He notices as she reaches down and he pulls his hand back before she can pick one up. It felt wrong for someone to hold it before Will got the chance to.

“And *how* am I supposed to see what it is with you doing that?” She raises an eyebrow at him.

Mike takes one of them out of his hand and shoves the badge in front of her face, “Can you see it now?”

“Don't be an idiot, Mike” Max responds, pushing away his hand.

He lowers it, placing the badge back onto his palm, turning them both over so that the design was face up. "I got Robin to buy one for both of us."

"Aw, thanks"

Mike flips her off.

"Mature" she rolls her eyes "But no, that's kinda cute" she pauses before smirking at him "You *are* a romantic"

"I'm also *never* sharing *anything* with *you* again"

"So, you *are* going to give it to him by the end of the week, right? As your official *confident* it's only fair that I'm at least in the area when you do."

"Yeah. I don't know when that's going to happen now."

"You're kidding right? Just do it."

Mike rolls his eyes, "Well, I can't just do it *now* can I, Max?"

"Yes. Yes you can. Maybe it will make things better."

"Or maybe it'll make things *weird*. I told him *some things* at the same time he told me he'd do me a favour and break up with me. We're good, we're *going* to be good, but I can't just waltz in and say, here have a badge."

"Boys are *useless* " Max's tone exasperated, "Lucas isn't even this bad."

"Wow. Hit a guy when he's down."

"Really Mike, give him the badge. What's the worst he's going to do, break up with you?"

And as she's laughing, he reaches for the pillow, aiming for her head once again.

---

Owens is in the middle of making more notes when El makes her way into the living room. He worried that he'd missed his chance to *talk* to Owens, with El being needed so soon, but ultimately he had to listen when Owens asked him to use their *connection* to call her in whilst he monitored the activity from the machine he was hooked up to. Clearly he'd found something of interest as he was still scribbling away as El says -

"You wanted to see me?"

She looks a little anxious, Will notes, but he considers that wires and doctors and tests are always going to be something that makes her on edge.

Owens looks up from his notebook and gives her a smile "Hi, El."

She gives him a small "*Hello*" back before joining Will on the couch, looking up at Owens expectantly.

"It's ok" he reassures "I just want to know how this all works, so that we can keep you and Will over here safe. But I'm going to need your help for that, is that ok?"

She nods, eyes glancing over to the machines "What are they?" She asks.

"Nothing scary" he smiles "Just a few wires to tell me what's going on in there" he says, tapping on his head. "I'll talk you through every stage of the process and if you want to stop, then all you have to do is say. Are you happy for us to start?"

Once El nods again, Owens busies himself with another one of the machines, gathering wires.

Will observes her for a moment, her fingers lightly tapping on her lap. Ignoring the fact that they still hadn't properly spoken about *everything*, he reaches across, taking her hand in his own before,

noticing the exact moment that El feels that he's trying to tap in.

*"Are you ok?" He asks*

*"Nervous" El replies, not looking at him, "it's been a long time"*

*"We don't have to do this. I've already made you do too much"*

*"No. It's ok." There's a pause, "But we do this together"*

*"Together."*

---

To Max's frustration, the moment El's bedroom door had opened, Mike had shot up from where he was situated on the bed, moving towards the bedroom door - ear pressed against it to try and hear what was happening outside - and promptly beginning to pace the room once again.

*It's stupid*, Mike thinks. He *knows* that's why El was asked to stay in her room and with her powers somehow linking with *whatever* is going on with Will, it was obvious that at some point, she'd be asked to join him in the living room. But knowing that didn't make this any easier.

*" Stop. "* Max throws the magazine down this time, *"You said about me not being stressed, but this , you, is what's making me stressed"*

Mike pauses momentarily, a scowl on his face. *"You don't have to be in here."*

*" Yes. Yes I do."*

*"Well can you do it silently ?"*

*"Ok, Mike,"* Max stands from the camp bed, moving to stand in front

of him, grabbing a hold of both of his wrists “I get it. It’s the ex-girlfriend and *lover boy* in there, but please, can you stop being so dramatic.”

Mike frowns, “I’m sorry, *lover boy*?” He asks, pulling out of her grasp and continuing his pacing.

“Yeah” she smirks “Because you know, you’re all *in love* and we all know what *that* means. You know when Lucas said that to me-”

“Max” he cuts her off “Please *shut up*.”

“Is there a *problem* , Mike?” She says, smirk widening.

“No” he says quickly “There’s no problem” he tells her, stopping next to Will’s desk chair. He curls his hands around the top of the seat, resting on the cushion.

“It’s just, you two seemed *awfully cosy* at the lake”

He throws the pillow at her head

---

“Ok, now I want to see what happens when you both turn it off”

*There’s a shift.*

Will gives El a quick glance which she doesn’t reciprocate, instead she continues to look at Owens, nods and fixes a determined look upon her face.

*She's acting strange, Will thinks. Why is she acting strange? Did she see something?*

"It'll just be one more quick test, but I want to see the brain activity when you both try to block the other out. Will, do you want to go first?"

At his nod, Owens requests him to try his hardest to keep El out. He gets them to continue facing away from each other, and asks El to signal silently the moment she begins to attempt to get into his head.

It goes as Will expected it would - he'd gotten enough practice keeping El out these last few months that at this point it was a walk in the park - Owens seemingly pleased with the results. It's when it's El's turn, however, that this part of their afternoon stops going according to plan.

It's strange, Will thinks, to find that something he hadn't given much thought to be confirmed. But when there's a distinct change between the results of his attempt at blocking and El's - followed by a very non-objective look from Owens - those thoughts and concerns from a few days prior begin to trickle back.

*I knew when he was activated. He could turn it off and on.*

*Isn't that what I can do?*

*Isn't that what I have been doing?*

"It doesn't work. I can't do it." El says frustrated, breaking his spiralling thoughts and he's grateful - he didn't want to go back *there* again.

"That's ok," Owens reassures, "always worth a try anyway. But, I think that's all for now, so if you wouldn't mind-" he indicates to the electrodes on her head. El leans forward, allowing him to take them

off. "We'll get to you in a second Will but El, if you wouldn't mind could you go and get your mom for me?"

El swiftly leaves the room, and once out of sight, Will turns to Owens, who's beginning to pack away the wires.

*It's just us again. Do it this time.*

"This is all confidential, right?" He asks quickly. "Anything I tell you?"

"Yes" Owens starts, dragging the word out slowly "But only if it's not something that puts you or anyone else in danger. Then I'll have to tell your parents, kiddo."

*Ok.*

*You can do it.*

*It's just us.*

"Ok." Will says, tone resigned. He closes his eyes for a moment and exhales "I think - maybe I *died* "

Owens blinks owlshly.

"I mean, obviously I *didn't*-" Will continues "but I really do think part of me *did* when I was taken," a *beat* "and then more when *He* latched onto me." and another "I'm not who I was - sometimes I wonder where *He* stops and Will begins again. I know that sounds weird and it's only really hit me in the last few days but I think maybe I've been

ignoring that for a while - longer than I should have been.” he sighs  
“So, yeah, that’s how I feel right now.”

He pauses.

“You need to tell my mom that, don’t you?”

Owens sits on the coffee table, leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees. “I don’t *have* to. But, would *you* tell her?”

“I think I would. But I don’t think I can, don’t know *how* I can”

There’s a noise from the hallway, a door being opened followed by the voices of Mike and Max -

“Let me out, *first*, Max. I have *priorities*-”

“First of all, *lover boy* can wait two minutes (“*Stop calling Will that, it’s weird*”) , *second*, I’ve been stuck in here, *with you*, for over an hour. If you think you’re seeing civilization first, you’re crazy.”

There’s the sound of a scuffle and then both Max and Mike appear in the entryway, both slightly out of breath. They both somber up once they take in the atmosphere in the room.

“Wow” Max blurts out “Who died?”

Will winces at her words, and whilst it goes unnoticed by Max, Mike is immediately by his side on the couch, reaching up to brush the hair that had displaced because of the tests, out of Will’s eyes.

“Is everything ok? How did it go?” He asks, taking his hand and interlocking their fingers.



Will feels his heart race at the gesture, something that was so small in the grand scheme of their relationship, but he was so aware of who else was in the room. He makes eye contact with Mike and, once their gaze is locked, he flickers his eyes over to Owens, before going back to Mike once again, who understands his meaning immediately, and unlaces their fingers.

“Sorry.” Will mutters to Owens “I didn’t - we didn’t think-”

Owens smiles “There are weirder things in this world than boys who like other boys, Will. You don’t have to apologise”

“I dunno, I’ve had to watch them make out and *that* was pretty weird” Max mutters and Mike flips her off. He moves then, taking Will’s hand once again, though it’s *Will* that moves to interlock their fingers this time.

Before anyone can say anything else, they hear “How did everything go?” as Will’s mom and El rejoin them in the living room. Owens smiles at them both as El takes a seat in the armchair - Max then moving to join her, perching on the side of it - and his mom heads to behind the couch, still standing, but leans over Will’s shoulders. He tilts his head back to look at her, and she scrunches up her nose with a smile and asks him - “You ok, baby?”

He reciprocates the smile before looking back down, clearly catching the end of the silent conversation between Mike and El.

Owens claps his hands together, bringing the attention back to him. “Ok, I think I’ve figured out what’s going on here.”

“Is it dangerous?” Is the first thing his mom asks “Is it harming them?”

He shakes his head, “Nothing *too* alarming in their brain activity-”

“But there’s *something*?” Will’s mom interrupts.

“Well, *mom* , we’re dealing with an *inter-dimensional* situation here, I’m not expecting clean and clear results like if I were to scan this one

here.” he points at Mike and Will can just about pick out a muttered “*debatable*” coming from Max on the armchair. “But, I’m not concerned by the changes - not *majorly* concerned anyway. I do think it might be a good idea if Will here pays a couple of visits to us at the lab though.”

“What are these powers exactly?”

“Well - and this is why I *do* want him to come in - from these tests and what he’s told me, there seems to be two things. The first being that Will is electrokinetic, meaning that he has the ability to manipulate electricity, as I’m sure you’re all aware from the amount of broken light bulbs he’s told me about. Secondly, and this ones a bit of a doozy, is this void-connection business he has with El. This is the one that I think has more of a connection to *the Upside Down* -”

“It’s *Him* right? He’s done it?” Will interrupts.

“Not necessarily. More like his *influence*. ”

*So, yes then.*

“My thinking is, when mom here got it out, much like that bite that El had, it’s left some kind of imprint, a *mark* on both of you. We know from before, with that *little incident* at the lab, that *He* operates on a Hive Mind kind of gig so, it makes sense that if you’ve both been in contact with it, there’s some kind of communication there.” Owens turns more directly to Will, “This *blocking* business, a *little more* interesting and I have some thoughts - don’t worry, you’re still clear - but we can go over it more when you come in. Sound good?”

On his nod, Owens turns back to Will’s mom “With El, her scan results haven’t changed much from ones she’d had in the past” he shoots El an apologetic look “We took over all your paperwork when the *original* owners of Hawkins lab *took off* , so I feel confident in saying that the bite she received is just suppressing the full scope of her powers but it doesn’t seem like she’s doing too bad. They’re

coming back, they just haven't come back completely yet. Her brain activity was very similar to Will's when he uses his powers. So I feel comfortable saying there's nothing nasty left over."

"Oh thank God" his mom breathes out.

"Can you make it go away?" Will asks quietly and Mike squeezes his hand.

"No," Owens replies, tone apologetic "I wish we could, Will, but it would be dangerous. Much more dangerous than if you continue to live with it."

At Will's frown, Owens continues "But, I can reassure you that every gate that we know about has been *permanently* closed, and we're almost certain there's no more anywhere in the world. These powers, what you can do, it's all just left over residue. We'll continue to keep an eye on all of it, and you've got to tell me the minute something changes, but I mean it when I say, things *are* going to be ok this time. *But*, you don't have to use them. Neither of you do, not if you don't want to."

And right now, Will doesn't think he wants to - though this time, it's not because he's hiding, not because he's avoiding what he thinks is inevitable, it's simply because he *doesn't want to*. These powers were given to him because of circumstances he's had no control over, right from the beginning. But this choice was going to be his and his alone. He'd voiced to Owens moments ago that he was unsure where The Mind Player ended and Will began and Will thinks for the first time that maybe, *this* is where that happens.

"Joyce, before I leave, can I talk to you for a moment?" Owens asks, voice pulling Will out of his thoughts. Everyone is standing from their seats and Will still can't see his mom's face but he assumes that she nodded, because Owens smiles at the spot behind him. Mike is standing in front of him now, and holds his hand for Will to take, pulling him up, and laces their fingers together one again. They give

one last *thank you* and smile to Owens, before making their way into the hallway.

“Are you alright?” Mike asks him as they’re all heading toward Will’s room, Mike and Will hand in hand.

He thinks about what he’s said and the conversation that Owens is having with his mom, but, despite all of that, he gives him a small smile “Yeah, I think I will be” and he thinks that maybe that really is true.

“Good” Max interrupts “I can’t deal with any more of Wheeler’s moping. Seriously, you should’ve seen him in there. He wouldn’t stop pacing.”

“I had to let off steam somehow” Mike protests as they all enter Will’s room, Max immediately making a move back to the camp bed, picking up the magazine that was haphazardly placed on top of crumpled - clearly sat on - sheets. She throws herself down, leaving El to take the desk chair and Mike and Will to sit on his bed, hands dislodging “You-” Mike touches his arm, “-were having all these tests done and El wasn’t allowed with us because *she* was going to have tests done -” he cuts himself off and sighs, “I just - I had a *lot* of things to worry about.”

“I’m sure you did” Will smirks “*Lover boy*”

And Max’s laugh rings out in the room, drowning out the sound of Mike’s groan.

## Notes for the Chapter:

Will's getting there, and he will get there (we promise).

Regardless, we hope you enjoyed this chapter, the

next one shouldn't be too far away (originally this and the next one were going to be one whole chapter if that gives you any indication) See you on the next one!

## 10. Dissolve the nerves that have just begun.

### Summary for the Chapter:

It's a feeling that's consuming. It's a feeling of being mesmerised. It's a feeling of being so wrapped up in a single person that if Mike were even able to begin to describe it, it would be *beautiful*.

And he thinks that maybe that's what Will is to him, too.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello, and enjoy (and maybe have a little look at the end note at the end of the chapter once you're done)



We now have a playlist for this fic that we will be continuously updating throughout! You can find it [here](#) It contains all the songs that are used as chapter titles, as well as all the songs features so have a little listen and we hope you like it!

### Saturday 4th July 1987. Benton, Illinois.

The clock is flashing just after eight when Joyce wakes up that morning. The Fourth of July had been looming over them like a thunder cloud these last few weeks, and the awful feelings that surrounded them had only strengthened the closer it became to the day. Last year, the house was a melancholy state of affairs, El had joined Joyce in her bed in the early hours of the morning which is where they'd stayed for the majority of the day, except for when Joyce wheeled the TV in, bathroom breaks and to answer the door to retrieve their takeout.

Jonathan had been working, so Will had popped his head in a few times, mood somber, which Joyce now considers was likely

heightened by the discovery that he could feel everything El was feeling - *though from what Owens told me it, who knows if that's what was heightening it at all.* Crying and sharing stories and tentative smiles over Chinese food, as a family it was more a case of just getting through the day as painlessly as possible before attempting to compartmentalise everything for another year.

Today, however, felt *unusual* to say the least.

There was still a sense of mourning, but not from loss of a person, as the body next to her could attest, but loss of *time*. They were never going to get back all the weeks, days, hours, minutes that they could've had with Hop if he hadn't been taken to *that place*, if those people hadn't taken him from his *family*.

She turns to face him in the bed, studying his face as he sleeps. He looks younger when he's asleep, she notes, the lines eased out from his face. She reaches up to brush his hair from where it had fallen over his eyes, and afterward, takes the time to rest her hand across his cheek, seeking one last bit of proof that he was here with her, that he was *alive*. It's a self indulgent moment but she can't bring herself to regret it when he stirs, eyes blinking open slowly as he nestles against the pillow. He gives her a sleepy smile once they lock eyes, and turns his head to kiss the palm of her hand.

"Morning" He affectionately mumbles.

"Good morning" she smiles softly, moving her hand away from his cheek, and down behind his neck, pulling herself into him a little further. His hand moves to wrap around her lower back, a solid, comforting weight.

"We're alright," he reassures, "I'm alright."

She wonders how it's been over twenty years since they were dumb teenagers sharing cigarettes and he still can read exactly how she's feeling. She moves closer to him again, "I thought I'd lost you for good this time," she mumbles, "I was alone with the kids, and I knew I had to try to keep it together for them but all I wanted was you back."

His eyes soften at her words.

"I know," he says, making soothing patterns against her back with his thumb "Me too. Thinking of you - *and El* - was the only thing that got me through being in that place. No matter how *hard* it got, thinking there was even the *slightest* chance I could come home to you kept me going."

She doesn't reply, not with words, but instead closes the remainder of the distance between them by pressing her lips against his. He reciprocates immediately, and she loses herself in the moment, using it to try and express what words could not. It's a little while later, when he finally pulls away that he says -

"Come to Chicago with me."

It takes a few seconds for her mind to clear from the moment they'd just shared and realise he's now talking about the business trip he has scheduled for Wednesday. He found out about a month ago that he'd have to spend a couple of days in the city for training as part of their yearly staff development scheme but with everything that had happened in the last week, it had been pushed to the back of her mind.

"What?"

"Come with me."

"I don't wanna leave the kids - not with *everything* ." Joyce trails away at the end, it all still feeling so *raw*. "Besides, I have work - and Mike's here and Jonathan-

"You've already told work there's a lot going on, I'm sure they won't mind if you need to take a few more days. Even if you have to take it unpaid, we *can* afford it now. *I guess* Wheeler can come too," he says dryly, "at least it means you weren't lying to the kid's parents after all. And we can check in with Jonathan, but he's more than ok staying by himself, especially as he'll be working - he is saving for



college after all.”

“Hop, I don’t know.” She wants to say yes, the thought of being away from him had left her a little on edge.

“I think we all need to get out of the house for a few days. Will can get some fresh air, you can worry about something that *isn’t* Will, and El can see Chicago when she’s *not* on a runaway mission from Hawkins.” he grumbles the last part “You’ll have to stay in a different hotel - ours is already booked and I don’t think my boss would take well to seeing family around, but you and the kids can get out, see the sights and we can all meet up for dinner. It’ll be good for us.”

She *sighs*.

“ *Only* if we can find somewhere nice to stay. And dinner is on you”

She *smiles*.

“Deal” he smiles back, and begins to move closer, clearly intending to pick up from where they left off when there is a small knock at the door. They both pull back on cue, Joyce rolling onto her back as Hop calls out a ‘*Come in.*’ The door creaks open slowly revealing El in the entryway, sad smile on her face.

“El, sweetie? Everything ok?”

El doesn’t give a response, instead making a beeline for the bed gesturing with her hands for them to part as she reaches the foot. Unceremoniously climbing over and between the two of them, once situated Joyce can’t help but smile as she wraps an arm around Hop, wordlessly nestling closer to him.

“Aren’t you a little old for this?” Hop jests, but places his arm around her too.

“No.” Is all El says.

They lay in comfortable silence for a little while, Joyce leaving them be. She reflects again on this time last year and how different everything is now, what her family - *their* family is now. Despite everything, they had *this* and no-one could take that away from them, not again.

“Hey kid, I was thinking,” Hop starts. It’s subtle but Joyce can’t help but take note of the tone of his voice - it’s fatherly in a way that’s reserved only for her. She knows that in Hop’s mind, Jonathan and Will are his kids just as much as El is, but the two of them will always have a bond that nothing can break “Why don’t you hang out with your old man, today? We could catch a movie, get some ice cream? Something like that. Max can come too, think it might be good for her. What do you say?”

She nestles closer, nodding.

It’s fleeting but Joyce and Hopper share a look over the top of El’s head. *Our family*, she thinks and she can’t hold back her grin. Kissing El on the back of her head, she says softly, “I’m going to check on the boys” before shifting the covers and climbing out of bed.

She makes her way to the kitchen first, just in case Will or Mike are already awake and also to start a pot of coffee. She finds neither of them there, but Jonathan instead, in his work uniform, setting down a plate of pancakes. Before he can sit down, she makes her way over to the table and hugs him from behind.

“Mom?” He asks, and she feels him tense, “Is everything ok?”

She smiles and reassures “Everything is *really* ok,” a pause “I love you very much.”

He taps her hand “I love you, too.” he says “Can I eat my pancakes now?”

Laughing, she pulls away, heading to the coffee pot, “They’re not working you too hard are they? I know you’re saving for college but if you need any help-”

He raises his hands, stopping her, “Mom, I’ve told you, it’s fine. NYU

is expensive. I wouldn't expect you to do that."

"You've been looking after me for too long. Let me look after *you* for a change." she pauses again, resting her elbows against the kitchen counter, head in her hands. "Hey, why don't you take some time off? I think we're going to Chicago for a few days on Wednesday. Could be nice?"

Jonathan shakes his head, "I can't. Carl needs me for overtime. His wife just had a baby and-"

"Ah, so they *are* working you too hard then"

"I'm fine." He asserts, but there's a smile on his face. "Go to Chicago, have fun, maybe buy me a cheap souvenir, and I promise the house won't be destroyed by the time you get back."

"That's good, seeing as we've just replaced all the lightbulbs." Jonathan snorts at her remark. Despite them joking about it now, Owens' conversation hasn't stopped playing on loop in her mind. She knows that if Will struggled to tell *her* something, aside from Mike, Jonathan would be the next best thing.

*It's worth a shot.*

"Has he said anything to you?"

"Not about the powers-"

"But about *something*?" she raises an eyebrow

"I'm not at liberty to discuss such things" he smirks "Brotherly code of honour."

"But he's ok, right?"

"Mom, I promise you, he's *fine*"

Ah.

“So it was about Mike, then?”

Jonathan doesn't reply, instead mimes zipping his mouth shut.

She rolls her eyes, then with a laugh and ruffle of Jonathan's hair, she leaves him to his breakfast.

---

**Monday July 6th 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

The phone rings at just before twelve that morning.

“Leave it.” El bluntly says, taking a sip of her orange juice, “ *All My Children is coming on.*”

“What if it's important?” Mike frowns at her, pushing settling himself back into the couch after shifting to see who was on the other end of the line.

“ *All My Children* is important.”

It's been a slow morning. Max leaving late last night had left them all a little groggy, combined, of course, with the events of last week. Will was still asleep, both Mike and El deciding to let him sleep in. He'd been a lot more tired in recent days, though they all considered that maybe his mind was finally letting him rest a little.

With the family at work - despite Joyce's insistence that she can take a few more days off if they needed her - it was pretty quiet in the

house, both Mike and El felt grateful for the calm, as they sink into the couch, drinks in hand, watching daytime TV, and making an attempt at taking no notice of El's periodical glances at the clock.

The calm is broken as the phone rings again and, at El's now not so subtle suggestion that he *should* get up and see who it is, Mike groans, pushing himself up from the couch.

"You know," he says to El, once he reaches the entryway, crossing his arms, "Really you should be answering this. It's your house-"

"- that you're a guest at for three weeks. As I said, *All My Children* is important." and with another sip of her drink she shoos him away.

He picks up the phone.

"Byers residence-"

"Holy *shit*, dude"

*Oh, it's way too early for this.*

"Wow, good morning to you too Lucas"

"Why didn't you call? I've been - (*"We've been, Lucas. I'm here too"*) - sorry, Dustin came over. Steve is taking us to the city which *you* could have been doing if you didn't ditch us for *romance*- "

"I'm sorry, did you just call me to tell me your life story, or does this have a point?"

Mike vaguely hears Dustin wrestling the receiver from Lucas (*"Give me that!"*) before he speaks.

“What Lucas *means* is, why didn’t you tell us about Will? Max told us this morning”

“Well, she certainly didn’t waste any time-”

“ *Mike-*”

“*Ok, ok.* It’s been a crazy few days, but I was going to tell you, I promise. Everything happened really quickly, *but* it’s all ok, nothing related to *that*. Well, not really. Not in the way we were worried about”

Mike hears Dustin sigh through the receiver, “Ok. That’s good.” He pauses “Though it would have been *nice* to have been caught up on that even being a concern in the first, because *today* was the first *I* heard of it”

*Oops.*

There’s a clattering through the receiver again, Mike rolling his eyes and pulling his end away from himself until a voice appears at the other end again.

“Sorry man, I was *trying* to explain to Dustin that it was more of a need to know - (“*And you don’t think I should have been involved in the need to know?*”) - *a need to know basis*” Lucas repeats, exaggerating his words “But I guess it doesn’t matter now. Well, now that we know it’s not the *big bad*. How is Will? Is he doing ok?”

*Do you want the truth or what Will would want me to say?*

“He’s - Will’s doing better.”

“So that means he’s *not*, then.” Lucas states bluntly.

“He’s better than Wednesday.” Mike concedes, voice low. “I think so anyway. I just - I just don’t really know *what* to do, what I *can* do. Owens visited last week and wants Will to go in for a few check ups. He says he’s fine with it, but it’s hard to know how he’s feeling and how to help.”

Lucas hums thoughtfully through the receiver. “Give me a second.” He says, and *more* clattering follows.

There’s talking that Mike can’t quite pick out, not clearly anyway, the voices sounding further away than they had previously so Mike can only discern that Lucas had put the phone down. He taps impatiently, looking back towards the living room, then towards Will’s room - the door still firmly shut. For a moment, he considers that maybe he should check in with him - after all, if Dustin and Lucas had time to have their own conversations then surely he could do the same.

*I guess he really did need to rest.*

Before he has time to make a decision, the phone is picked up again.

“Ok. We’re coming to visit.” Lucas states.

“Lucas, you guys don’t need to-”

“You might not think we need to but we can *want* to. We’re a party, we stick together (*“and when one party member is down we all need to help out” - Dustin calls out*). Today might be a bit too late notice, plus Dustin has been going on about how he hasn’t seen Steve in a while (*“I haven’t been going on-”*) so maybe in a couple of days?”

“Well,” Mike starts, “about that. You can’t.”

“Mike-”

“I’m not being a jerk, you genuinely can’t. Apparently, we’re going to

Chicago on Wednesday. Only until Friday but, yeah. That's what we're doing."

" *Just*, you and Will? (*"Jesus Christ-"*) "

" *Obviously not Lucas*. And Dustin, don't think I can't hear you just because you're not the one holding the phone." He sighs, continuing, "Hopper thought that maybe it might be a good idea for us to get away for a while. He's doing some training for work, so we're all going."

"Do you *have* to go?" Lucas responds

"Do you *really* think that Hopper would let us stay here alone - well, with Jonathan? I think it's obvious that we *have* to go to Chicago." And Mike can just about hear Dustin ranting something along the lines of "*would we really want to go if they were alone anyway?*" through the receiver "Besides, I told my mom we were going so this conveniently works out. I can get some souvenirs for her, I'm sure she'll love a *I heart Chicago dish towel*. "

"Yeah, that screams *Karen Wheeler*" Lucas says dryly before he continues, "You said you get back on Friday, right?" Mike hums in response, "So what about Saturday? Or Sunday?"

"Sunday maybe. It might be a cool surprise for Will. I'll check with Joyce."

There's a *slight* pause on the other end of the line.

"You'll check with *Joyce*?" Lucas snickers, "Since when was she Joyce?"

"Since she was born?"

The phone clatters again, Mike rolling his eyes at the sound.

"It's not *just* that you're calling her Joyce, you're going straight to the



source to see if we can visit. *And* you're answering their phone. What's next? Calling her *Mom*?" Dustin interjects.

"I'm hanging up-"

The bedroom door opens and, finally, out walks Will, still wearing pyjamas and stretching his arms above his head. He catches Mike's eye, raising an eyebrow and mouthing *who's that?*

"Mike? I thought you were hanging up?" Lucas says, now back on the end of the line.

"One second-" Mike rushes, putting the receiver to his chest, just about hearing a muffled '*Mike?*' through the line.

" *Good morning.* "

*Lucas and Dustin groan through the phone.*

"Just about." Will replies, making his way over to the phone. He stops in front of Mike and with a soft "*Hi, you*" he gives him a small kiss.

*Lucas and Dustin groan again.*

"Is that Lucas and Dustin?" Will asks once he's pulled away, gesturing to the phone "Why are they calling?"

"Max and her big mouth." Mike replies, rolling his eyes as he ignores Lucas' cries of "*I'll tell her you said that*" on the other end of the line. "They're checking in. Seeing how you're feeling."

“Oh,” Will says, tone slightly off “Let me talk to them,” he adds, holding out his hand,

“Are you sure?”

Will nods, making a *give it to me* hand gesture, “Might as well get it over with.” and taking the phone from Mike he greets with -

“So, how much do you know?”

---

**Wednesday, July 8th 1987. Chicago, Illinois.**

The ride to Chicago can only be described as *hot*. Despite their early start, the temperature was already in the late eighties and the sun was beating down. Will finds himself in the back of the car in between Mike and El, and whilst the windows are rolled down as far as they’ll go, the backseat really isn’t meant for three people and the heat mixed with their close proximity makes for an uncomfortable journey.

El, disregarding their dad’s warning of how ‘*reading in the car will make you feel sick and I’m not cleaning it up*’ flicks through one of the *Wonder Woman* comics Max had brought with her, and subsequently left, when she returned to Hawkins last Sunday. She sits with one foot up on the seat, leaning slightly into Will, angled towards the open window.

“Do you *have* to sit like that?” he mutters about an hour into the journey

“I’m hot.” El responds, not looking up as she turns to the next page.

“Oh, and I’m not?” He rolls his eyes.

“You have two windows, I have one” El replies, nonchalantly.

“I have *no* windows. I have *no* breeze. I *don't* need you leaning on me.”

“And I don't need-”

“We have another *three and a half hours* to go and *I don't need* you fighting the entire way” their dad interrupts, teeth gritted as he turns around from the driver's seat to frown at them quickly before putting his eyes back on the road “I can't believe out of all of you, Wheeler is the one who is *actually* behaving.”

Will glances at Mike who shrinks into the seat, arms folded across his chest.

A lot had happened, if he thinks about it, in the time since *friends week* back in Hawkins. For a moment, Will wonders if he should have seen it sooner; his reaction to Castle Byers (or rather the *lack of*) for starters as being some kind of indication as to what was to come. In hindsight, it was obvious all of this had been building for a while, and whilst he is glad it had finally all come to a head, he wishes he'd caught it sooner before he said things he really didn't mean. Despite the fact that he and Mike had now talked everything out, *multiple times*, he still heard his own words echoing back around his head -

*“Actually why don't I do you a favour and just end this now- ”*

So really, the two weeks could be summed up as *emotional*.

They're good, Will knows they're good, but it's *different* now. Almost like they're both holding something back - things they don't want to say, feel they *can't* say, being *too* careful. But overriding all of those thoughts is the idea that just a week ago, Will had nearly lost him and knowing what that could have, *would have* felt like, if no longer holding back is the way to avoid that, that's what Will will have to do.

*How to do that is kind of a problem in itself.*

He has an idea of something he could do, of course. But there's the fact that he doesn't know if Mike would even want him to do anything, or to say something - maybe he's fine with the way things are now -

"Are you ok?" Mike asks softly

Will doesn't realise he's still looking at Mike until he meets his gaze.

"Of course" Will nods, "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You just looked like you were thinking" he shrugs.

"People tend to do that."

"*Funny*" Mike snorts, a smile forming on his face "But really, are you ok?" he asks again, voice lower this time.

Just as he's about to answer, he notices his mom turn in her seat slightly so she can see him a little easier. It hadn't just been Mike that things had been *different* with, and he knows that she is hanging on every word he says, especially after what Owens would have told her and the upcoming scheduled visits to *wherever it was* that he worked now. Not wanting to get into *that* discussion with three hours left to go and nowhere to escape to, he gives Mike a small nod and a smile and then turns back to the *main problem* at hand. He swipes the comic out of El's hands, though as soon as he has it in his possession, it's pulled away from him and back with El. Without giving him a second glance, she wipes at her nose as she turns another page. Mike laughs, earning a glare from Will before he groans, closing his eyes and letting his head lean back against the seat, willing the rest of the journey to pass quickly.

---

Chicago is just as hot as Benton, Will notes as they scramble out of the car when they arrive at their hotel.

“Are you sure you’re going to be ok, Joyce?” his dad asks, as he and Mike help his dad pull their bags out of the trunk and drop them on the sidewalk. “I’m sorry our hotels aren’t closer together”

“I lived alone with two kids for years. I’m sure I’ll manage. Besides-”

“I worried about you even then” he interrupts, smiling at her, taking her hand.

She rolls her eyes but gives him a tender look “ *Besides* , your boss would find it weird that you changed hotels at the last minute, especially because it’s not close to where you need to be. This way neither of us have to travel far every morning.”

“Call the hotel if you need me for anything. Do you have the number I gave you?” he says seriously and his mom nods in response, tapping the pocket on her shirt.

“We’ll be fine. We’ll have a nice time exploring, Mike will have *actual* Chicago stories to tell Karen, and we’ll all see you for lunch on Friday” she plays with the lapels of his jacket “Don’t let them work you too hard.”

Will and El look at one another and grimace before their dad pulls his attention to them - more specifically, *Mike*.

“Hands to yourself, Wheeler.”

“ *Hop!*” His mom lightly hits his chest with the back of her hand.

“Just because you boys have your own hotel room, doesn’t mean the rules have changed.”

Mike scowls “I don’t know why you *always* think-”

“ *Got it.* ” Will interrupts, nudging Mike slightly.

“What he said.” Mike’s reply is nothing more than a grumble.

His dad glares but doesn’t say anything else to either of them, instead saying goodbye to El, who hugs him tightly, one last clap on the shoulder for Will, and kissing his mom again, he climbs back into the car, waving as he drives down the street and out of view.

“Right,” His mom says as she picks up two of the bags from the sidewalk, “Shall we go check in?”

The Willows Hotel is a quaint, old building that stands out from the rest in the middle of the street. Being welcomed in by an *overly friendly* concierge, Will’s mom walks up to the check in desk, giving their name and confirming their check out date leaving Will, Mike and El to congregate, with their bags, on the chairs in the corner of the lobby.

“You know,” Mike starts, “I think I’ve heard of this place. Al Capone used to stay here.”

“Al Capone?” El questions, “What is Al Capone?”

“Seriously?” Will raises an eyebrow, “How would you even know that?”

“We did a project on it in school - (*“There’s no way you did a project on Al Capone staying at The Willows Hotel in Chicago”*) - It seemed like a ridiculous thing to learn about the time but I guess it’s good I learnt about it now right?”

“Yeah,” Will replies, dryly, “Knowing Al Capone used to stay here is really going to speed up the check in process.”

Mike rolls his eyes “Just trying to add a bit of light to our first morning in Chicago.”

“Oh, and Al Capone is considered *light* conversation?”

“What is Al Capone?” El asks again, exasperated.

“Why are we talking about Al Capone?” They all look up to see his mom, who had rejoined them, room keys in hand and what looked like a map of the city. She throws Will one of the keys - *Room 35* - and picks up two of the bags once again. “Not the lightest of conversations to be having.” Will gives Mike a smug look causing him to hold his hands up in defeat. “Ok, let’s go drop our things upstairs and then why don’t we have a look around the city.” And with a nod, they stand from the chairs, pick up their duffle bags and begin to make their way to their rooms, Will hearing El ask their mom “*What’s Al Capone?*” once again.

They’re only on the second floor, *thankfully*, Will thinks as they trudge up the stairs; the tiredness of the early start this morning combined with the events from the week prior catching up on him as the hours went on. He’s *ok*, well a little better and thinks that maybe getting away from the house and into the city for even just a few days *was* a good idea. Reaching *Room 35* they give a quick wave to his mom and El - after a call of “*Ten minutes. Downstairs*” - they unlock the door and step inside.

*She’s really trusting us*, he thinks. Pondering on that for a moment, he walks over to the bed by the windows, in the far corner of the room. He takes a quick look outside, watching as the cars drive by on the busy streets of Chicago. Mike shutting the door pulls his attention back to the present, turning to see him peer into the bathroom - pulling the light on and off again - before facing Will and setting his duffle bag down on the floor.

“Ok, which one do you want?” Will asks, gesturing to the two single beds in their room.

Mike shrugs “You choose.”

Will deliberates for a moment “I might as well take this one” he says, pointing toward the one in front of him. Mike gives him a smile in acknowledgment, picking up his bag one again and placing it on the bed. He rummages around, sorting through some of his items, and

pulling out the clothes he'd packed for the next couple of days "So they don't wrinkle"

Will laughs "You're starting to sound like your mom"

Mike jokingly flips him off, as Will starts to open his own bag

"We should hurry up, Mom said we have to meet them in the lobby in ten minutes and I wouldn't want to come in between El and shopping."

---

**Thursday July 9th 1987. Chicago, Illinois.**

Thursday brings another early start, and although whilst it was still warm, it brought the small relief of slightly cooler temperatures. They'd spent the day prior exploring the city, museums, *and a little bit of shopping*, before finishing their day with a walk along the harbour. They'd arrived back at their hotel around eight in the evening, had a quick dinner in the hotel restaurant, before retiring to their rooms, exhausted from the long day. Will had fallen asleep pretty quickly, barely even having chance to say goodnight to Mike, and to his delight had a nightmare-less sleep, which made him feel so much more refreshed than he normally was at seven-thirty in the morning.

It's just after breakfast when Will pulls his mom aside and asks if he can speak with her. Mike and El had both headed back upstairs to retrieve their backpacks, and Will - after asking Mike to fetch his, too - had quickly stopped his mom before either of them returned.

"What were you thinking about doing today?"

His mom gives him a peculiar look, "What was *I* thinking about doing today?"



“A *general* you.”

She hums, whilst raising an eyebrow. “Well, I thought we could go to the mall, pick up a gift for Jonathan, get some lunch. See where the day takes us.”

He pauses for a little too long.

“Why? What did *you* want to do then?”

“I was wondering if me and Mike could have a few hours alone?”

Her eyebrow raises once more and her tone is *very* neutral when she asks “Where?”

“I’ve done some research on this place that’s not too far from here and I want Mike to see it. It’s really important to me, to us. Especially after everything that’s happened recently, everything I *said* , I just really need to do this.” She doesn’t respond, though when he receives an almost thoughtful look instead, he continues, “It’s really really close to here, it’s just the next street.” He reassures “We’ll be three hours, tops. And then we’ll come back here and meet you two for lunch. I *promise* .”

There’s more pause and he waits anxiously, rocking slightly on his heels. Finally, after feels like forever, and just as he can see El and Mike about to rejoin them, she sighs and says - “Two. You’ll be *two* hours”

He grins at her “Deal”

---

“So, why exactly have you brought me to this random street?” Mike asks, gesturing around them as they come to a stop outside *The Unabridged Bookstore* on North Broadway, opposite West Aldine Avenue. Will hadn’t told him much, just that they were going to be taking a little detour from the shopping trip Joyce and El had planned and “*spend some time just us*”.

“Look around” Will replies “What can you see?”

Mike frowns “It’s just a bunch of shops, Will”

“Look closer” he says, pointing at the bookstore window.

Mike does just that, focusing his eyes a little more at the display in the store, it takes a little while but eventually he hones in on a familiar little colorful flag in the bottom right of the windows.

*Oh.*

His gaze lands back on Will, who gives him a small smile.

“We missed it” he begins again “By a week, but we said we’d come” Gesturing all around them he adds “This is where the parade happened. The pride one-”

*Oh.*

“-It seems like a few decorations are still up, though. But this could just be what it’s like. *And* I’ve looked it up and so many of the shop owners are like *us* . Or want to help, especially with-” Will hesitates for a moment, almost checking himself “-Well with everything going on right now. We’ve just got to look for the rainbows, I guess.”

*He remembered.*

*One* hypothetical comment from over half a year ago, and Will had gone out of his way to research and take him, take *them*, to somewhere so important. Mike doesn’t know how to explain exactly how this makes him feel, all he knows is there is a bundle of nerves -

*good nerves* - forming in his stomach as he looks around the streets and back at Will. It's not just the fact that *Will* brought him here, either, it's that for the first time, he's surrounded by an entire community of people who *understand*.

And he knows that Will would know just how much that means to him.

*Guess this is Will's version of what Steve would call a 'grand gesture'.*

He stills for a moment.

*You could do it now.*

*You can do it now.*

"Actually, speaking of that-" Mike clenches and unclenches his fist before reaching into his pocket, the contents no longer feeling like they're burning a hole in them, no longer feeling as though they're a weight he's not sure he can carry. "- I got you something, *us* something." he holds out his hand revealing the two rainbow pin badges. Will looks down into his hand, then back up to him. "You don't have to have one. Not if you don't want it." he pauses "Never mind, it doesn't matter-"

Before he can put them away again, Will swiftly takes one from his hand, running his fingers round the edge of the badge.

"Did you buy this?"

"Yeah- well, kind of? Robin bought it for me, *but* it was *my* idea. I didn't think you'd want a bracelet like she had. I know that's not

your style” Will chuckles at the words “I did ask, if there was one specific one for me, if I had a flag but there isn’t. Guess we’ll have to share. If that’s ok?”

“Have you just been walking around with these in your pocket the entire time?” Will holds the badge up.

Mike playfully rolls his eyes “Wow. I say all these heartfelt things and you’re just making fun of me.”

“So, that means you *have* then” Will smirks, taking another look at the badge, “How long have you had them?”

“Almost a whole month. Sorry I didn’t give it to you sooner *but* I wanted to. I nearly did when we were in the cabin and then I showed Max, and she said I should just do it. I just didn’t know when, but I think now is right-” he shrugs “-look for the rainbows, right?”

Will is silent for a while as he fiddles with the badges. He takes the second one from Mike’s still outstretched hand and carefully removes the back. Reaching for the collar of Mike’s shirt, he carefully presses the badge through the fabric and attaches the back “Guess we can just share the flag for now” Will smiles, fingers lingering against his shirt. Mike feels his heart beating a little faster than normal. He returns Will’s smile, albeit his own is a little shakier.

“I’m sure there will be one for me, some day. I’d like there to be.”

“Even if there is, you can *always* use this one”

Reaching for Will’s own pin he reciprocates the action, securing the pin firmly on his chest.

“Well that’s good, because there’s no one else I’d want to share with.”

The two hours before they need to reunite with Joyce and El are spent wandering the streets, hands brushing against one another before Will takes the initiative to take Mike’s in his own, and

browsing the small selection of shops *Boystown* had to offer (“*I should probably get my family some souvenirs. You know, since we’re actually in Chicago*”) . It’s a little overwhelming, Mike thinks, not just because for the first time in their relationship he feels like they’re *allowed* to show that they’re *in* one, but also in little ways, like the amount of flags he can see in the windows. They’re often tiny stickers in the bottom corners, *blink and you’ll miss them tokens*, but they’re there and they symbolise that he’s *not* alone, not here. They’re not just bright colors to him, nor are they any longer symbolising a harsh reminder as to who *he is*, but instead, they’re a beacon of understanding and acceptance and he catches Will smiling at them a few times, too.

“*Oh!*” Will says suddenly, halting their movement on the corner of West Cornelia Avenue. He lets go of Mike’s hand, pulling his backpack off of his shoulders and rummaging through, “*I brought this.*” Will pulls out a Polaroid camera, placing it in Mike’s hands as he puts his bag back on his back. “*I thought it might be nice if we took a few photos. You know, if you wanted to do that?*”

It all happens rather quickly; the flash of the camera, Will squinting at said flash, Mike lowering the camera back down towards his chest. A single picture comes out of the camera, Mike removing it and giving it to Will, a smile on his face.

“*Sure.*”

They don’t stop then. Flash after flash, picture after picture, they take so many that eventually Will runs out of film - even after using the spare cartridges he’d brought with him. They’re not perfect, there’s not a single one which comes out without flaw. The majority are slightly blurry, taken when walking or speaking or laughing, and some are so out of focus he doesn’t even really know how it happened, but the images are so unequivocally *them* that Mike loves every single one. The one of Will grinning as he eats an ice cream, the one of Mike browsing in a record store, the one of Will in the same store, holding a Bowie record, eyes shifted slightly toward the side as the not pictured employee tells them “*no photos allowed*”. There’s the one of them together in the middle of the North

Broadway, Will holding a little souvenir flag he'd bought, and their faces pressed close, as they both smile at the camera. His favourite, however, is the one that immediately followed - "*just so we can both have one*" - where Will had turned his head last minute to kiss Mike on the cheek. Mike loves it, not for the fact that Will is kissing him - although he's not complaining - but because the genuine happiness on both of their faces is so obvious even through the grainy film.

"Do you want this one?" Will asks as they watch the picture begin to develop.

He almost says yes, he *wants* to say yes but then Mike remembers. He thinks of his mom, his dad, how they don't know - and how he really doesn't think this would be the best way for them to find out.

*I should be the one to do this. No one should get to take that away from me.*

But thinking that doesn't make the not being able to take the photo hurt any less.

His breath catches before he can speak, almost as if every part of him is willing him on as if to say '*do it anyway*' in protest to that shot back down to reality realisation.

*Don't ruin it.*

*Don't ruin today.*

Will's head resting *rather awkwardly* resting against the crook of his neck pulls him back and Mike can't help but let out a small breathy laugh before resting his own on top.

“What if I keep this one on my shelf for now? Would that be ok?”

“It really would.”

---

When they arrive back at the hotel - ( “*We’re only fifteen minutes late, mom won’t mind*” ) - Joyce is pacing outside the entrance, with El perched on the bike railing. She’s relieved, naturally, to see them, but Mike can tell there’s an underlying sternness in her expression.

“I said *two* hours, Will” is the first thing she says as they approach, stopping her pacing and folding her arms against her chest.

“I’m sorry, we’re only a little late. I thought it would be ok?” Will grimaces.

“You can’t just *assume*. I didn’t know where you were, *I* don’t know the city, you don’t know the city. Anything could have happened.”

“It’s only *fifteen minutes*—”

*Let’s stop talking, Will.*

“And it only takes *fifteen minutes* for something to happen” Joyce sighs, running her hand down her face, “We’ll talk about this later, me and El saw a nice restaurant a little way down the road from here. You can tell us about what you’ve got up to, and then El wants to show you a few things she picked up”

The restaurant is a little busy when they finally make it there, Joyce not hesitating to make a couple of remarks about how if they were a few minutes earlier they would have had an easier time getting seated.

“Mom.” Will says bluntly, “I get it. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. Can we eat now?”

They’re taken to their booth by their waiter, enthusiastically introducing himself as Charlie, who hands them the menus and tells them *“I’ll be back in a moment”* in an absentminded tone as he weaves through the tables to usher a group of three to a table.

“So. What *did* you do today?” Joyce asks as they’re flicking through the extensive menu. Mike looks over to El, frowning at the page she was currently on before turning to the back of the menu, looking over the desserts. He isn’t sure what to get himself, his dad’s words of *‘if there’s a lot of choice they probably don’t know what they’re doing’* echo a little through his mind. He glances back at El, making eye contact this time, who shrugs and mouths *“waffles”*

“Well-” Will starts as he’s reaching into his bag that was dumped under their booth, pulling out the small stack of polaroid pictures from the hours prior, all now fully developed. “I took Mike to where Chicago’s Pride Parade has been held the last couple of years. It was last week but I thought it would be cool.”

Placing them on the table, he settles back onto the seat, a little closer to Mike than before, thighs touching. Mike goes to mumbles a *“sorry”* and attempt to move away but as Will places his hand on Mike’s knee it’s like there’s a switch in his mind.

*This is different*, Mike thinks. *This feels different.*

He doesn’t move, of course - Mike instead, gives him a curious look noting how Will looks awfully casual as he peers over the table using his one free hand to push them a tiny bit closer towards his family - too casual, *way* too casual.



Joyce must have noticed, and El. There's no way they couldn't have, Mike considers thinking on how they were situated; *pressed together, Will using only his right hand, his other hand now subconsciously tapping.* He braves glancing at him again, as Joyce and El make small remarks at the display in front of them, frustrated over how much he's thinking on this, overanalysing every slight movement, every tap, every time those taps seem to become more like shapes and patterns - *circles, squares, letters, lines* .

It's annoying really, how calm Will seems to be and how calm Mike feels *he* isn't, because ultimately, Will isn't *actually* doing anything - besides they'd just spent the afternoon *attached* with a rather blasé attitude towards others opinion, this is *nothing*. He doesn't know why he's freaking out so much, not really; why everything is so heightened, why he's so *aware*, when this is *all* that Will is doing.

*You were calm when you did that at the lake. Sure it was just because Steve suggested it but was a lot more intense than whatever is going on here.*

*You definitely were not calm at the lake when you did that.*

*And who are you kidding that it was just because Steve suggested it? You knew exactly what you were doing-*

"We just walked around, took some photos. Mike -" Will reaches across himself to place a hand on his arm, lingering once again "bought a few things for his mom and dad, kind of as a *proof we actually went to Chicago* thing."

"Yep" he squeaks - *calm down*. Will quickly shifts his eyes at this point, the repetitive action stilling which, Mike decides, now that it's over, that *isn't* what he wants.

Despite the *conveniently* hazy memory of setting a rule a week prior about taking it slow, cutting back on the PDA-

*Well, it was something like that .*

It's a wordless conversation between the two of them, but the expression on Will's face tells him all he needs to know; *Is this ok? Are you ok?*

He still doesn't know why it's hit him so completely and fully - maybe it's a come down from the rushing emotions of the morning they've had, maybe it's the realisation that for the first time since their relationship began they've been *in* public, not with their friends, but as two people very much in a relationship, maybe it's the words *I'm in love with you* replaying like a broken record in his mind - *or maybe it's the fact that for the first time Hopper isn't here breathing down my neck about things I may or may not do.*

Of course he's ok, Mike is more than ok - completely overwhelmed in a way he didn't expect in the middle of a restaurant in a city he didn't expect to go to, but *ok*. Because right now, his mind is just *Will*, utterly consumed by it and, as terrifying, in the best possible way, everything may be feeling right now, he's not ready to let that go.

Will begins to move his hand away putting his internalised plan in a spin.

*Yes Will, now please continue to keep your hand on my leg* is what he decides against saying, instead he gives a small smile and with his own hand, places it on top of Will's, interlocking them over his knee.

There's a flicker in the light above their heads.

*Oops.*

Will curses under his breath which grabs Mike's attention. He gives his hand a reassuring squeeze, and hopes to feel it reciprocated. It takes a moment until they're back in their orbit, the tension in Will's hand dissipating as he gives Mike the confirmation that he needs.

Joyce and El, have a few photos in hand when they're brought back into the present at the restaurant, flicking through them - El taking pause as she reaches the one where Will is kissing his cheek. She looks up to Mike, raises an eyebrow, the signs of a smirk appearing on her lips.

"You know, I think I want to keep *this one* for myself" Joyce, holds up the photo of Will in the street eyes squinting, clearly not expecting the photo to be taken, "This is definitely one for the fridge"

" Mom!"

Will leans across the table to take the photo out of his mom's hands, to no avail, but if on his return back to his position, he's even closer to Mike once again, no-one - especially Mike - mentions it.

Charlie *finally* returns to the table, ready to take their order, Mike gives an awkward shake of his head when he turns to face him - having been far too preoccupied with *whatever* Will was doing to give the menu anything other than a quick glance after they'd first been given them. Joyce goes first, followed by Will and then El, buying him a little bit of time to choose -

" *Chicken fingers* . I'll have the chicken fingers."

" *Sir*, that's from the *kids menu*" Their waiter drawls out.

*Shit.*

“I know..?”

“Mike, honey, you can order something bigger” Joyce reassures.

“No, I know I’m just - well, I’m not hungry” *I’m. Starving.*

“Mike,” Will raises an eyebrow, “All we’ve had today is ice cream -” they both pointedly ignore Joyce’s frown. “Are you feeling ok?”

“Yes.” No. “Really, it’s fine. It was a big ice cream. I’ll just have the chicken fingers.”

Charlie is clearly judging as he writes his order down, the muttered *ok* under his breath being all the proof Mike needed of that. He grimaces, sinking a little into the seat, crossing his arms against his chest, taking his hand away in turn. He asks if anyone needs any drinks refills before heading back to the kitchen to place their orders.

It doesn’t take long for Mike to realise that El is staring at him. It’s even more obvious when the second he looks up at her, she immediately averts her gaze. So, when she announces, *way too casually*, that she’ll be going to the bathroom, Mike knows that she’s clearly been planning this.

“Oh, I’ll come with you” Joyce says, shuffling out of the booth after El. “Are you boys able to hold down the fort? We weren’t able to find one earlier”

With a nod, and a *mmhm* as Will takes a sip of his drink, they walk away from the table.

*A silence.*

Mike drinks almost half his drink in one go, just for something to do.

“You are ok, right?” Will finally asks, albeit slowly, “ *Really* ok?”

“No, no, I am. Well, *now* I am anyway” Mike pauses as Will gives him a perplexed look “I *just mean*, you. You’re very-” He sighs before mumbling, “You’re very distracting.”

*Although apparently today, that’s an understatement.*

“Oh.” A grin forms on Will’s face. “I’m. Distracting.” but Mike thinks that the last part is more Will telling himself that than for Mike.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Mike jests, rolling his eyes.

“You said it, not me.” Will shrugs, “How long have I been distracting exactly - since you proudly told Dustin I was hotter than Phoebe Cates or-?”

“ *Ok*, we’re done.”

Will chuckles, leaning forward to take another sip of his drink.

And Mike *exhales*.

He sits, doing nothing for a moment, tapping his fingers against the small space of the leather booth between them. On the whole, Mike Wheeler considered himself someone that once something was set in place, something was determined, he’d stick to it. It was something he’d always done, something that was only heightened after the events of 1983 .

Today, however, was the day that Mike Wheeler discovered he was also a *hypocrite*.

The rules that he found so hard to recollect, for obvious reasons, moments ago come back to him; *I'll go back on the camp bed, we'll maybe cut back on the PDA but really we'll just relax.*

He is *anything* other than *relaxed* .

PDA was very much not cut back on today.

*That's two out of three already broken.*

So really, what's one more person breaking the rules for today? *Technically the PDA rule only said 'maybe' anyway.*

He moves his hand slightly, then halts it, considering his actions.

*Don't overthink it.*

Slowly, he places his hand between the booth and Will, halting one final time, before wrapping his arm around his lower back. Will freezes, giving him a quick glance - Mike, this time, trying to remain casual. There's a shift again, Will shuffling closer, leaning into the touch.

"You are ok, right?" Will asks one more time, voice softer. " *Really ok?*"

“Yeah. Really ok-”

The lights flicker one more time. Will stiffens once again.

“Right,” Mike starts, dragging out the vowel “Are *you* ok?”

*A pause.*

“I’m just *frustrated*.” Will sighs, “I was doing so well-”

“Will, it’s only been a week. It’s understandable that they’re not completely under control yet.”

“No, I know. It’s just *annoying*. The first time I thought *ok, that’s fine*, but twice within ten minutes of the others? I think this is the first time since Owens though - is this the first time? I really have been trying but-”

“Hey,” Mike cuts him off giving Will a squeeze, “You’ve been trying, that’s all that matters. Think about it, I know you had those few months where you tried to block everything but that’s not like what you’re doing now. This is something *for you*, and it’s so hard what you’re doing - we all know that. You’ve made a lightbulb flicker *twice* in a week, nothing’s exploded, and that’s really awesome.”

Will relaxes a little.

“You know, I don’t think I can let your mom have this photo.” Mike says as he *just about* reaches across the table, picking up a few the polaroid including the one of Will that Joyce was looking at earlier. He holds them between the two of them, careful not to touch the film, “Definitely one to show Lucas and Dustin when - well, when I get back” *nice save*.

“ *No-one* is seeing that picture”

He flips to the next one, a small smile now on his face. Mike’s eyes flicker towards Will, his expression the same. “What about this one then? Is this one to show Dustin?”

Will takes hold of the other side of the picture, his fingers lightly brushing against Mike’s own. “I think this can be just for us. I mean, it’s *us*, you know?”

“Yeah, it’s us.”

It’s strange, as he lets this all happen that everything feels so natural. There’s no real thinking involved, not in the way that there had been prior, not about anyone else around them. They’re simply going through the motions that it’s like everything has fit so perfectly into place.

Mike tries to process that *different* feeling from earlier once again. It’s new and he finds that he can’t quite pinpoint it- like a ball of *something* hovering in his chest, his stomach, his being. Mike doesn’t think it’s unpleasant, the opposite if anything, but it comes with an air of self-consciousness; *Could El tell? Is that why she left? Is it obvious? Am I too obvious? Is that what Will feels too?*

Will smiles one last time at the photo before placing it back onto the table and shuffling a little closer into Mike’s hold - Mike letting him - and he lets himself think that maybe, Will does.

Though, if he *really* thinks about it, it’s not too new at all, more that this is the first time he’s really allowed himself to pay attention to it - no longer hiding under the guise of ‘*I was trying to make a point*’ and pushing everything *deep, deep down* as he processes his identity and who he is - and now, despite the fact that his parents *still* don’t know, that there’s still this looming feeling of *what if* and *what’s going to happen when everyone finds out*, he thinks that he can’t, that he doesn’t *want to* , ignore it anymore.

“I had a really good day today” Mike says softly.

“Me too.” Will agrees, smiling.



"It's nice, being with you like this. No worrying, no constantly looking over our shoulders to see who's watching; just getting to be us. " Mike continues, fingertips rhythmically tapping along Will's side. "Thanks, really."

Will snorts, "We probably could have been a *little* more careful."

"Yeah, but no-one said anything - they're s *till* not saying anything. I don't know, it was nice to feel not so alone. I knew we weren't the only two like us, *obviously*, but seeing it just made it feel so *real*" Mike pauses. "Am I making any sense?"

"No, I understand. I felt like that too."

"Next year, let's go - to the parade I mean. And for real this time, not a week late"

Will turns towards him, ever so slightly, studying his face, making sure to hold his gaze.

"Next year, huh? So you still want to go?"

"Yeah, I do. I think, maybe, there's still lots of things we've got to do. We've still got the lights in Du Quoin to see, and New Year's. They're on *your* list. I am still rooting for us, despite everything that's happened, I *still* am."

"I am, too." Will beaming "And I'm so glad we *can* do this now, plan dates, find spaces that are safer for us, plan things for the future, and I love that when thinking about all of this, I only ever see *you* next to me" he takes a breath "Mike, I-"

But Will doesn't get the opportunity to finish his sentence being interrupted by an easy-going -

"So, what did we miss?"

Mike looks away from Will to see Joyce and El have arrived back at

their table, El already clambering across the booth to take her seat.

“Nothing” they both echo quickly Mike hearing the rise in pitch in his voice.

“Ok” Joyce furrows her eyebrows, looking over to them as she follows El into the booth. Sitting down, she watches both of them intently, before focusing in on Will “What’s that?” She asks, pointing to Will’s shirt. Mike follows her hand, eyes landing on the pin badge and watching as Will, with his free hand, fiddles with it, smiling.

“Mike bought it for me. He’d been holding onto it for a month” he pauses, smile widening “We match”

He gets so distracted by the intensity of the smile, that it takes El’s voice to bring him back to reality.

“Pretty” she remarks “Where did you get them?”

“Robin” he says quickly, not taking his eyes away. Really, to Mike, it feels wrong Joyce and El being there. Not from a lack of wanting them around but it doesn’t feel right that they’re here for this. It’s very intimate, they’re on their own plane of existence, and now that he’s so acutely aware of that fact he doesn’t quite know how to escape those feelings - *but if they could not be here that could help*. That feeling *certainly* isn’t helped as feels El staring at him again. Begrudgingly pulling his gaze away from Will, he looks over to her, frowning. He’s surprised by how she looks; her head is cocked to the side, and there’s a neutral expression on her face but he can see the wheels turning in her head, almost as if she’s trying to figure things out - that what he isn’t sure. Joyce interjects before he can say anything, leaning forward and straightening up the badge against Will’s shirt.

“No matter who got them, or where they’re from, the fact that you’re wearing them is incredible. I know that I’ll never understand fully just how *hard* all of this is for you both, but it means a lot to me to see you being more open with *who you are*”

And as they see Charlie approaching their table with their food, Mike can't help but feel that last part was *just* for him. He moves a little closer to Will, arm still tight around his waist and smiles.

"Yeah, me too."

---

"I got you something when we were in the bookstore."

Mike looks up from his position on the bed, taking his shoes off. He'd just gotten off the hotel phone with his mom ("*Thanks for letting me know you're alive, Michael*") and was now finally sitting down. He hadn't realised it at the time but the day had been quite *long*. Continuing on to more museums and shops after their meal at the restaurant, both himself and Will (and he was sure he could speak the same for Joyce and El) couldn't wait to just get back and rest.

"Yeah?" Mike questions, kicking off his last shoe, "And what was that?"

"A book."

"*Obviously.*"

Will moves towards Mike's bed, carrying his backpack in both hands, as if it were a parcel. He sits, placing his bag down between the two of them, before opening it, pulling out his camera and then a small multicoloured book, holding it out in front of him. Mike takes it out of his hands, taking in the cover and reading the words *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. He pushes back the small thought of

why Will read the book in the first place, focussing more on the gesture itself.

Gifting someone a book has always felt like such a personal thing. It's a particular type of acknowledgement that Mike can't quite describe. Just knowing Will had started reading, and that as the story, the characters and the world had lived inside his head - a process, Mike thought, that was always so unique - afterwards it had been *Mike* he'd thought about.

"I really liked it, I bought the second book in the series for myself today. I just thought you might too. It's different but there's so many things in it I *know* you'd love."

Will is beaming as he describes the story and Mike feels his stomach *leap*. Will looks so happy, a contrast from the last few weeks; there's no sad lines around his eyes, only joy, crinkled in the corners as he smiles. He's tripping over himself as he speaks, gesturing with his hands to get himself back on track. He's catching himself before he spoils parts of the story. He's tapping on Mike's leg as he thinks of another reason why the book means a lot to him. He's softly laughing about how he *can already guess Mike's reaction to this one part*. It's a feeling that's consuming. It's a feeling of being mesmerised. It's a feeling of being so wrapped up in a single person that if Mike were even able to begin to describe it, it would be *beautiful*.

And he thinks that maybe that's what Will is to him, too.

"-I don't know." Will continues, "You don't have to read it, but maybe give it a try."

"*I will*." Mike reassures, maybe a little more firm than he'd meant it to sound, "Hey, maybe hold off on reading the sequel. If I like the first one, we could read the second together?"

"I'd like that."

Mike flips over the book reading the blurb, flicks through the pages, before placing it down next to him on the bed. "Thank you. I can't wait to read it," and Will swings his legs off the side of the bed mumbling a small "*you're welcome*." There's a moment then, fleeting,

but no less meaningful than before. Mike pulls his hands away from Will's face, his thumbs lingering, gently brushing across his cheeks, as he rests his forehead against Will's, both of them smiling.

*Yeah. Today's been a really good day.*

Mike settles back after a while, once Will's eyes had fluttered open and Mike had leaned in one final time, finding themselves in a comfortable silence. They're still close and Mike revels in it, moving to rest his head on Will's shoulder, as he tries to figure out what music is being played in the room next to them; *Tears For Fears? Wait no, Spandau Ballet? Not that it really matters-*

*No, It is Spandau Ballet*, he thinks as he just about picks out a few of the lyrics to *True*.

*'Listening to Marvin all night long,*

*This is the sound of my soul.'*

He tenses.

Will tenses.

The silence no longer feels as comfortable.

"They're, um-" Mike clears his throat, "-they are really trusting us, huh?"

*Awkward.*

“Yeah.” Will pauses and Mike feels him swallow “Don’t know how mom convinced dad to let this happen.”

“He can’t be *too* mad, hands were kept to themselves. I think that was the only rule. You know, for letting this happen.”

*I know this much is true'*

Mike thinks that the *ha*’s interjected throughout the song have never sounded more mocking and he wishes the music would just *stop*.

“Well, *mostly* to themselves” Will bumbles. (“*Ha haha haaa ha*”)

“Yeah, *mostly* -”

“Because you know - in the street , in the restaurant, just now in here-” Will trails off towards the end, fidgeting with his hands.

They both awkwardly laugh.

Mike sits up, taking his head off of Will’s shoulder, not breaking their proximity as he faces him. Will mirrors, wide eyed and biting at his cheek. It feels different, *everything* feels different and heightened as *True* continues to play, and Mike thinks that the dulcet tones of a saxophone have never seemed louder or more prominent. Holding his gaze, he notices all the little things, taking in everything that makes Will, *Will* . The way his eyelashes kiss his face when he blinks, the smell of his cologne, acrylic paint, and *Reeses Pieces* . But then there’s

*more*, like the way his hands were still fidgeting, his fingertips rhythmically tapping against the others ever so lightly. The soft sounds of his breath. The way he's looking at him *right now* .

*Oh. Oh, Ok.*

Mike exhales and Will does the same, as Mike reaches out, tracing his fingers down the length of Will's arm- who watches before slowly meeting his gaze, once again, with heavy, hooded eyes.

"I - *well* - I didn't mind," eyes flicker to Will's lips, "the rules being broken a little." He hears himself back and he can't believe he sounds so confident when his heart feels as though it's about to burst from his chest.

"I guess," Will's eyes do the same, "as long as neither of us mind."

*Hopper definitely would though.*

*Why are you thinking of Hopper now?*

"Well, from the moment I got to Benton we never *stuck to the rules*." Closer, and closer still, Mike's voice becomes more of a whisper.

"So, why should we stop now?-"

*Knock, Knock.*

They jolt apart.

It all happens very quickly - Will, now red-faced, scurrying away from the bed and towards the hotel room door. Mike watches as he checks the peep hole, sighs and opens the door a few inches.

“Mom. *Hi* . Hi Mom.” Will stumbles over his words as soon as he says them. Mike notices the way he’s using all restraint to keep his voice casual and steady.

“Hi, Will.” she replies slowly.

Mike throws himself back onto his bed, hands over his eyes.

*Holy shit*, is all he can think. *Holy. Shit.*

He can hear Joyce talking to Will about the plan for tomorrow - *check out times, when she wants us to meet downstairs, if we have any preferences for lunch* - and more than anything he’s hoping that Will is taking this all in, or at the least is making notes, because Mike is remembering *very little* of the conversation.

*Holy shit.*

*Were we going to-?*

*Did Will want-?*

*Holy. Shit.*

“So, does that all sound ok?”

“Yep. All good. Goodnight Mom”



There's a short pause.

"Goodnight honey, I want you downstairs at *nine* so don't have *too* late a night " her voice is knowing, as if she has an eyebrow raised and Mike pulls his blanket over his head, letting out a small groan.

*So much for casual.*

" *Goodnight, Mike*" Joyce continues, a sing-song tone to her voice.

"Goodnight Joyce" his reply is muffled slightly from the comforter over his head, but he doesn't have it in him to pull it down yet.

And the door shuts, Mike letting out a breath but not moving from where he was situated on the bed - comforter and all. There's silence, even from the room next door and Mike wonders when the song stopped playing. Neither of them are saying anything, the only sound being Will's footsteps beelining across the room, followed by the sound of springs as he sits on his own bed.

More silence .

"We should probably-"

"Get ready for bed" Mike interrupts.

There's a rustling of clothes.

*A sigh.*

"I'll change in the bathroom then."

"And I'll change in here." Mike affirms unnecessarily.

By the time Will is back, Mike's already in bed, lights in the room off. Will doesn't say anything until he too is under his covers, facing the ceiling.

"Well," he starts tentatively "Goodnight, Mike."

"Goodnight, Will."

It's quiet, *too quiet* really, the telltale signs of Will sleeping - or at least making an attempt at sleeping - not there. He can't really comment, he's doing exactly the same; lying still, ruminating, *trying not to think*. There's a feeling within the room, something encasing them both, an overarching feeling of just waiting for something to tip - almost like he's standing on the top of a high building, looking down.

*I need to say something.* He thinks, pulling the cover over his head. He stills and listens to Will again, those signs still not there, if anything it almost sounds like he's pretending to sleep.

"Will?"

"Yes?" He responds a little too quickly.

"You're always distracting. Have been for a while."

"Yeah?" is all Will says, and Mike knows him well enough to hear the slight smile in his voice.

"Yeah, you have."

It's quiet again.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I think you're distracting too."

Mike smiles in the darkness.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Just to clarify, the rating of this fic WILL be kept as T, as writing and reading anything more isn't something we love and adding to that fact they're both teenagers. However, exploration of feelings felt like a natural progression throughout the story for them - and these discussions can be important especially in YA literature as quite often this is something that is explored as part of being a teenager.

As with anything we've written however, especially in this story, everything has been written for a reason, and we wouldn't write something, especially something along these lines, if it didn't serve a purpose so...just something to consider ☾☾

## 11. So live and let live in love

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Nothing happened.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” her voice is airy, and she gives him a small quirk of the eyebrow.

“Yes you do.” he shoots her a scathing look. “But nothing happened, so you can stop looking at me like that”

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello,

It's been a hot minute since we last posted. Thank you for the nice comments and kudos we've been receiving in the mean time - honestly it's been these that have kept us wanting to write. We were a little disheartened after posting the last chapter, as we think a few things were misunderstood. As we stated in the authors note of chapter ten, we have absolutely no intention of changing the rating of this fic to anything higher than a T and also have no intention on writing any explicit scenes as we believe this isn't our place to do. What we did want to do is create and portray a realistic depiction of teenage relationships, based on other books with characters of around the same age (for example, Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe, Simon Vs The Homosapiens Agenda, Our Own Private Universe, Leah on the Offbeat to name a few) and also scenes we have in Stranger Things itself (Nancy/Steve and Nancy/Jonathan). We worked really hard to make sure that we portrayed this in an emotional - rather than the usual physical - way. These scenes, when written by adults, should be emotion based, as

they are written on reflection and experience and not FOR other adults. We do think that it is important to depict this aspect of relationships, as they are totally normal and healthy and this isn't shown often (online, in a lot of media and even in sex ed in schools). The practical is often displayed, which is unrealistic and quite frankly often there for adults (which, we think isn't necessarily appropriate) whereas the emotional is often overlooked and yet this a important way (especially in a coming of age story, which is what this fic essentially is) to show young people that these feelings exist and are okay to have. We thought it unrealistic to not include at all, especially the way that we've written and developed these characters, but we've aimed to do it in a respectful way.

We hope you enjoy this chapter and thank you for reading :)

We now have a playlist for this fic that we will be continuously updating throughout! You can find it [here](#) It contains all the songs that are used as chapter titles, as well as all the songs features so have a little listen and we hope you like it!

**Sunday July 12th 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

It's close to *eleven* when they arrive back in Benton Friday night; the journey, once again, being uncomfortably hot and undertone with Hopper grumbling about *rush hour traffic*.

Once the relief of *finally* pulling open the front door to the Byers home had dissipated, fatigue kicking in, they hadn't had the opportunity, or the energy, to do much other than say a mumbled *hi* to Jonathan, eat pizza, and stumble into bed half asleep. With being Saturday much the same, lounging on the couch, El making the occasional appearance between *mysterious* phone calls and what she told them was studying (*"We need to make a start on summer*

*homework at some point, Will”*), when Sunday morning arrives, Chicago is still at the forefront of Will’s mind.

Laying in bed, looking up at his ceiling and creating patterns where there aren’t *stuck on constellations* , Will thinks that maybe it will *never* leave his mind - certainly not helped by Mike pulling himself out of the camp bed at around *nine thirty* , a bundle of clothes in hand, only offering a hurried “*I’m awake so I might as well get dressed*” as an explanation.

*Maybe we’re just not going to talk about it*, he thinks, finally slipping out from under the comforter though remaining on the bed considering that maybe there’s a certain irony to the fact that the conversation that’s distracting him so much is focussed on that *exact* topic.

*Think about other things.*

*You can hear the coffee machine.*

*You want a coffee.*

*Mike’s making coffee.*

*Mike’s making coffee and still not talking about what happened in Chicago.*

Running two hands down his face and groaning, Will finally gets out of bed and makes his way to the kitchen.

He doesn’t *need* to talk about it; it would be nice, but he doesn’t *need* to - is what he tells himself in an attempt to reason with his thoughts. The scent of coffee and the murmurings of conversation between Mike and El lures him down the hallway. He can’t really pick out what they’re talking about, only able to make out the odd word - *maybe they’re still tired* - and by the time he reaches the archway, they still haven’t noticed him. Will leans against the frame and watches on for a moment, as Mike picks up the coffee pot to pour El a cup before

he takes hold of his own, as El uses the hair tie on her wrist to tie up her hair. A pang of guilt strikes and he looks on a little longer, his words from a week prior beginning to spiral around his mind.

*You apologised. You're doing well. They're doing well.*

*You're ok. It's ok.*

And with a breath, and a smile upon his face, he takes a step into the kitchen.

“-So I think it will be around - *Will*” startled, the coffee in Mike’s hand spills down his front as he *finally*, Will thinks, spots him. “Hi. Good morning” he bumbles over his words, wiping down his shirt, “*Hi.* ”

El wears a blank expression, raising an eyebrow at Mike.

“Hi?”

Mike looks down at his cup, then back to Will once more, “Do you want some?”

“You sure?” Will asks, eyes narrowing slightly. He’s not sure why he’s asking. For the past two weeks it was a given that Mike would make himself a coffee - to have it promptly taken by Will himself - and it wasn’t going unnoticed that Mike’s coffee preference was becoming eerily similar to his own.

“Well. Yeah.” Mike raises an eyebrow, pushing the cup nearer to the edge of the table, “It’s just how you like it - *oh* , and me too, *obviously*. It was a coffee for me. *Initially.* ”

*Knew it.* Will can’t help but find himself fighting back a smile.

El narrows her eyes “What’s going on? Why are you both being weird?”

“We’re not being weird.” Mike protests.

“Yeah.” Will agrees, “Not weird.”

*Definitely something two people that aren't acting weird would say.*

“Definitely weird” El echoes his own thoughts back to him and wrinkles her nose, picking up her coffee cup to take a sip.

“ *You’re* weird.” Will shoots back - *like a child*.

“And here I was thinking I had a lucky escape on the sibling fighting front” three heads turn in unison to face his mom crossing the threshold.

“What?” El asks as their mom kisses her on the top of her head.

“Jonathan and Will never fought,” she replies, moving to greet both Mike and Will too, “but my luck was bound to run out at some point” she smiles as she sits, reaching for the coffee pot that was sitting close to El. “Still cranky from the long journey, yesterday?”

“Why do you think we have a *massive* pot of coffee?” Mike leans forward, resting against his forearms.

“Are you doing anything today?” Will asks his mom, *finally* taking a hold of Mike’s, still warm, cup of coffee - the small smile appearing upon Mike’s face as he does so, not going amiss. “Or need any help with anything? I don’t mind cleaning up if you want me to?”

His mom shakes her head, “No, it’s fine. You just focus on you and your friends. Speaking of - Mike? What time are they arriving?”



*Wait, what?*

Will quickly swallows his mouthful of coffee, lowering the mug to just below his chin “Who’s arriving?”

“*No-one*” Mike snaps up from his relaxed position on the table - he’s not convinced - “*Someone*. Well, some *people* .” he sighs. “It was meant to be a surprise *for you*. Lucas and Dustin are coming.”

*Oh.*

“What time?”

Mike looks quickly at his watch and gives him a sheepish grin “Anytime now”

“Mike, I’m not even *dressed*” he gestures to his pyjama bottoms and old T-shirt - both Mike’s at one point - before looking to El, then to Mike, then to his mom, then tugging at his clothing once again. “I’m the *only one* still in pyjamas”

“I didn’t know you were going to be up so late”

“I was awake when you *hurried* out of the room at *nine thirty* to get dressed-”

He winces at his tone as soon as the words come out of his mouth - grateful as his mom clears her throat, cutting the tension in the room, and asks slowly, “Is everything ok?”

*Yes? No? I think so?* It is ok, of course it is - at least he hopes it’ll continue to be after that ‘not-so-nice response’ - but between his

broken record thoughts of *why are we not talking about it* and the now surprise arrival of their friends, Will thinks that maybe he can allow himself to seem a little overwhelmed.

A rhythmic knock interrupts before either of them can answer, eyes shooting toward the front door. Will sighs, takes another look at how he's dressed before placing the coffee cup back down on the table.

"I'll get it?" Mike's words sound more like a question as he shoots Will a guilty look.

"Tell them I'll be back in a couple of minutes"

And with that, he turns and heads out of the kitchen, back toward his bedroom.

---

"Seriously Byers, why do you have to live so far away? We had to get up at *six* just to get here."

"*You* were up at *six*, Dustin. I was up at *five* making sure we were awake so we didn't miss the *Greyhound*."

Will is greeted with a hug when he comes back into the living room - giving an apologetic smile to Mike over Dustin's shoulder. There's a part of him that wishes it was more of a surprise. Waking up to his friends from home, sitting around the kitchen table, greeting him in the same way they had just done; although it didn't *exactly* go to plan, he can't say he isn't in no way grateful.

Will considers that maybe he hadn't taken much time to think about how, how he was feeling was impacting those around him, both in Benton *and* in Hawkins. The fact his friends were here, for *him*, after everything that had happened - he doesn't feel guilty, so to speak, but

there is a sense of bittersweetness underlying everything.

*No. We're not thinking like that.* He stops himself. *That's what got you here in the first place .* So instead, he returns the hugs, maybe pulling a *little* tighter than he usually would, resigning himself with the fact that his friends are here, and that's enough.

"You could have got a later bus." Will snorts, "You didn't need to be up *that* early"

"And miss out on quality time in the Byers-Hopper, *and Wheeler* household? No thanks." Dustin grins.

"You didn't need to add my name in." Mike states, matter of factly.

"What? It's true! You're on a first name basis with Mrs. Byers."

"You know my mom wouldn't care if *all* of you called her by her name, right?" Will rolls his eyes.

"That would just be *weird*" Lucas remarks. *Blunt .*

"Why?"

"Because she's *Mrs. Byers .* As far as I'm concerned, that is her name."

"You literally make no sense." Mike mutters.

" *Anyway,*" Will breaks the conversation, "How are you? Both of you"

It turns out Hawkins was largely the same as how he'd left it those three weeks prior ("*too hot to do anything other than sit around or go to the lake or pool.*") Will listens to them talk, noting how Lucas occasionally looked over to Mike, who responded with nothing more than a frown. He finds himself wondering when they're going to bring *it* up, after their conversation on the phone earlier that week he can't imagine them *not* talking about it and he's surprised Dustin

hasn't exploded with the desire to, by now. Lucas continues on, first about summer homework and how '*the teachers gave way too much this year*', then how he got permission to be on an '*extended stay at Dustin's*' though he's not entirely sure how he was able to do that. The quick glances to Mike continue, Mike now making a point of ignoring each and every one to Lucas' chagrin. Really, he wishes they'd just come out and say it - *another thing we're not talking about to add to the list I guess* - instead of dodging the topic entirely.

*Unless they really don't want to?*

*Maybe I'm thinking too much and should just appreciate the fact they're here.*

"Anyway," Lucas clasps his hands together "Where's El?"

"Max said you guys almost broke up" Dustin *blurts*.

*And it begins.*

"I hate her." Mike mutters under his breath.

Will nudges him, rolling his eyes "No you don't. We're *fine* " he stresses, turning back to Lucas and Dustin.

"But did you? Almost break up? Because as a party, this is something we need to be prepared for."

"Dustin, we're *fine*. We're not breaking up."

"Are you *sure*-"

" *Dustin.* " Mike snaps. "Is that all you're concerned about? With everything, you're worried about whether you need to be *prepared* for

a break up which isn't even going to happen in the first place?"

"Obviously not, *Michael*. We're concerned about *other things* too" *Please, just finally talk about the other things then*, "But, you're both important to us and as much as you may not believe it after the *friends week* incident ("*Incident is one way of describing it*") we want you to be *happy* "

There's a strange calm in that moment. Will knows they care, and Dustin is right, despite everything that had occurred during *friends week* - some of which he, along with Mike, *maybe* had been a catalyst for- they had made it clear that they were supportive, they always had been.

From that conversation he'd had with Dustin on New Years Eve, from when Dustin had visited Mike on Valentines Day as a *replacement date* and so many conversations in between, caring about *them* is all they'd ever done. But hearing this now hits in a way Will didn't expect. Whether it be the emotions from the previous weeks still lingering, he thinks it's never felt more sincere. Looking over to Mike, his eyebrows pointed upwards, expression *soft*, Will thinks that Mike's face reads exactly how Will himself is feeling.

Thoughts of why they're *not talking about it* seem insignificant in that moment; as Mike looks over, as the start of a smile appears on his lips. There's lingering questions - Will supposes that even if it had been spoken about they'd still be there - but maybe, for now it doesn't matter. Because ultimately, wasn't that what Chicago meant? That they're happy? That they're *so* ok and they're happy? So many pictures, so many memories, the feeling of just being free and secure in who *they* are. Pins and books and flags and that *ridiculous song*, and words of being *distracting* which Will supposes means "*You're always on my mind.*"

They need to talk, he knows they do - he imagines Mike feels the same but maybe for now, *this* is ok.

Will reaches over, and takes his hand.

“Look,” Will starts, “We appreciate the concern, but we really are *fine*. More than fine”. He pauses, then says, “I’m happy. Mike makes me so happy”

And when he says those words, Will thinks that maybe he could be ready to tell Mike what Mike had told him.

“Yeah. He makes me happy too.”

Dustin looks over to Lucas and pretends to gag “ *Disgusting* ”

“What happened to wanting us to be happy Dustin?” Mike bites.

*And back to reality.* Will can’t help but grin.

“You can, just don’t do it in front of *us* . If you remember, *I-*” Dustin clutches at his chest “- am going through a break up”

“Dustin, it’s been over a year. You tried to ask El out on a date on New Year’s Eve.”

“And I am still wounded by her rejection.” He replies in a dramatic tone, earning a roll of the eye from Lucas.

Mike groans, throwing his head back so that it rests against the back of the couch. The movement causes the sunlight streaming through the window to catch on the small badge Mike was still wearing on his t-shirt, light dancing around the room.

It starts with a point.

Dustin reaches out to touch and Mike raises his head once again. He swats him away and Will finds it hard to hold back a smirk at Dustin's persistence.

"Can you *stop* doing that?"

"Where did you get that?" Lucas asks, "Why do you have that?"

"Why do you *think* I have this?" Mike retorts, rolling his eyes and gesturing between himself and Will.

"I know *that*. *How* do you have it?"

"Mike bought it - well, one for me and him." Will interjects, "Mine is on my other shirt."

Lucas and Dustin's eyes flicker to one another.

"*Well*, isn't Mike just the best boyfriend *ever*"

"Look at you both *matching*- "

"*Ok*." Mike drops Will's hand and stands from the couch, "I'm going to get a drink. Anyone want anything?" And upon a shake of everyone's head, Mike moves to the kitchen.

"But seriously Will, how are you?" Lucas asks a little after they hear Mike open the fridge door, muttering through his options, before finally taking out the carton of orange juice.

"Yeah, you had us pretty scared when we heard what had happened," Dustin nods.

"I'm-" *Good? Ok? Working on it?* "-managing" Will sinks a little deeper into the couch.

"Managing is - well, that's good Will."

Will nods, "It is, and I am managing more every day. The first week was hard but I think getting away for a while helped too. New place,

no Mindflayer out to get me—" Lucas grimaces, "Sorry. Bad joke. I'm *fine*. Really. Being out of here helped. Chicago is really cool."

"My dad used to go a lot and really liked it too." Lucas agrees, "You know though, you *can* tell us if you're not managing. Even if it's about the smallest of things. You can tell us."

"I know" and he *does* "Thank you"

"So. Tell us about Chicago. Get us any souvenirs?" Dustin grins.

He launches into the story of Boystown, telling them how cool everyone seemed, how safe they'd both felt, and how wonderful it was to be surrounded by people just like them. Mike had rejoined him on the couch midway through, drink in hand, slinging his free arm around Will's shoulders with a smile on his face, and had occasionally chimed in with anything he thought Will had missed. It's when Will mentions a few of the souvenirs he'd bought, and the pictures they'd taken that Mike pushes himself off the couch once again, giving a quick "*I'll be right back with the polaroids*" as he leaves.

"He seems different." Lucas says after a beat, "I said he was being open before but this is *different* to that."

"It's good, isn't it?"

And it takes Will slightly off guard when Lucas and Dustin agree.

"I know you were joking about the badge but I think that took more than you realise. He'd been holding onto them for a month before he gave it to me." Will fiddles with the hem of his jumper. "A lot of things happened really quickly for him and it must have been so hard - it was hard for *me* at first, still is sometimes."

"I'm not going to say it doesn't worry me." Lucas admits, "Hawkins *isn't* Chicago. If Troy was still around, think about what he'd say if he found out. *But*, this is good. For you and him. It's nice not seeing him so in his head."

"Yeah," Dustin jumps in, "We definitely don't need to be witness to



*anything* like the lake incident again - (*“absolutely not”*) - but it is nice to see you both happy. I meant that.”

“I know. It is nice. It really is nice.”

And as Mike comes back down the hallways, flicking through the polaroids in his hand - pocketing *one* in particular - Will can't help but feel *warm*.

*Because he's in love with me.*

*And I'm in love with him.*

---

**Monday July 13th 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

“Hey mom.” Will greets when he enters the kitchen that morning - after *carefully* padding across his bedroom floor so as to not wake Mike, who was still asleep hugging at the pillows of his camp bed.

“Good morning, honey” she smiles up at him from the table. The wedding brochures littered in front of her don't go unnoticed, and he can't help but feel that it's his fault planning had been put on hold. He pulls one of the brochures towards him, turning the pages, and biting at his cheek as he sees the venue they were meant to be visiting last Tuesday.

“No. None of that, ok?” Will looks up towards her “A venue can wait, *you're* more important.”

"But you said you loved this one," he frowns, as he pulls out a chair, joining her at the table, "Is there any way you can reschedule?"

Joyce reaches for his hand across the table "It has been booked up-" Will makes a move to protest before Joyce interrupts "- *but*, it doesn't matter. There's other venues, there's only one *you*."

"Mom-"

"No." Her voice is firm, but still reassuring, "You're more important to us than any of this, Will. You thinking that you're not is one of the things we said we'd work on." She gives him a playful smile "You're a pretty great kid. It's about time you realised that." She squeezes his hand, smile widening.

"I love you, Mom," is all he says in reply.

"I love you, too," she squeezes his hand once more. "How are you feeling? With everything going on over the last few days I haven't really had a lot of time to check in with you."

"Good," he reassures "Seeing Lucas and Dustin helped."

"I'm glad. Sorry you were in pyjamas when they arrived - if it makes you feel better, Mike wasn't *exactly* the clearest on timings with me either."

*Yeah, Mike's communication skills seem to have been lacking as of late.* Will grins, turning his attention back to the brochure back on the table.

"So, what did you all get up to?" She asks, peering across to the page he's looking at, offering a quick *Oh! That one!* under her breath.

"Nothing really. El came in a few times but kept saying she had homework to do. Really, they just asked me how I was, how we were. I told them about Chicago and Dustin took that as an invite to ask about what we'd bought him and- *what?*"

She's giving him a curious look from across the table.

"What?" He asks again, slower this time.

"Nothing. It's nice to hear you all had fun." her tone is nonchalant.

*Too nonchalant.* Hesitant, he continues.

"Yeah - and then Mike showed them the polaroids we took on the street and then when he told them about the book I'd got him, Dustin got even *more* frustrated we didn't give him a gift-" he trails off towards the end as his mom, still oddly nonchalant, taps lightly against the brochure in front of him. *Ok*, he thinks, pulling the brochure away from himself, and her fingers, closing it and stating *bluntly* -

"Nothing happened."

"I don't know what you're talking about," her voice is airy, and she gives him a small quirk of the eyebrow.

"Yes you do." he shoots her a scathing look. "But *nothing* happened, so you can stop looking at me like that"

Because nothing *did* happen. Despite what she may be thinking, despite what it must have looked like, despite the situation leaving conversation open to something they probably should talk about - *nothing happened.*

Will knows she isn't convinced - if he's honest with himself, he doesn't know if he would be if he was her in position - and from the way they were in the restaurant, he doesn't blame her, *though if she believed me that would be nice.* Slumping his shoulders, realising she's probably not going to let this go; he's known her long enough to know she's been sitting on this since Friday night just waiting for an opportunity for this to be brought up, he reluctantly gives a little

more context.

“After you left, Mike hid under the covers.” he mutters - *and please leave the conversation there.*

“Oh,” his mom’s tone a little more serious now. “Have you spoken about it? Any of it?”

“No. We don’t need to. It’s fine”

*Is it?*

“Is it normal to not talk about this? You know, even *if* nothing happened?”

“Well,” His mom scoots her chair over a little closer to him, brushing away a few more of the brochures in front of them, “for starters, maybe we shouldn’t have picked up so many of these wedding magazines from the supermarkets.” Will chuckles, “But, with something like this, I think if it’s even the *smallest thought*, you have to be *ready* to talk about it. *Before* anything happens. Even if nothing happens”

“And how do you know - you know, if you are? Ready?”

His mom gives pause for a moment, “Well, if you have to *ask* that, you’re probably not.”

Strangely, Will finds himself feeling a little lighter voicing these thoughts - even though, if he thinks about it, he hasn’t really said anything at all. Will, in anything personal, had always gone to Jonathan first - no particular reason, more that he felt his brother would understand on a level that his mom couldn’t. But he can’t help but admit, his mom’s words have helped more than he thought they ever could.

"I don't think anything would have happened, not really. If you hadn't interrupted I mean." He opens up a little more, shrugging. "I think we just got caught up"

"And that's *normal* . These feelings and emotions, they're completely normal and healthy. I just want you - and Mike - to be completely on the same page. Both happy, and both ready. There's no rush to any of this." she gives a small smile "And if you're both never ready, that's absolutely fine too. Still completely normal."

"I think I could be - *not right now*, but maybe one day" Will admits, feeling his face flush ever so slightly at the thought "I'd never thought about it before, not properly. But it's weird, the more I *do* think about it, the more I realise it's a scary thing to share *so much* of yourself with someone."

"It is," she agrees, "It *is* a scary thing. I was scared."

"Really?"

"Really." His mom nods "I was around your age, too. But I knew it was the right thing to do at the right time with the right person."

And if he really takes the time with that idea, he realises that maybe he *has* found that person.

It's a little overwhelming that someone can be *so much* and just the thought alone is a lot to comprehend. Will doesn't know what Mike thinks about it all- and how much weight he can put on an awkward *hiding underneath the cover* as Mike's opinion on the matter - but, just like he realised when Lucas and Dustin were visiting, maybe having those private thoughts could be *enough*.

*Remember when you said you were never going to fall in love? How's that working out for you?*

He isn't aware he hasn't spoken in a while until his mom lightly taps the top of his hand. She gives him a smile, and he smiles back.

"You'll be ok. It's all part of growing up and no matter what, I'm always going to be proud of the young man you're growing up to be."

"Thanks, mom."

"You're welcome, sweetie." She reaches over and ruffles his hair, "If you need me *anything* -"

"Oh, *no, no.*" Will grimaces and pulls away, waving his hands in protest - *way too much for one day.* "I'll be ok, I've got it covered"

*Well. I'll find a way to get it covered.*

*A way that isn't my mom.*

She laughs, pushing out her chair and standing from the table, before beginning to pull the magazines towards her. "Well, ok then. You know where I am"

Picking up the brochure he'd moved away from them a few minutes before, he hands it to her before also standing and making his way to the cupboard to take out a mug so he can pour himself the coffee he came in here for.

"Hey mom?" He says, mug in hands, angling himself slightly towards her.

"Hmm?" She finishes piling the magazines and looks up to face him.

"Let's not tell Dad we had this conversation."

She grins.

---

Wednesday July 15th 1987. Benton, Illinois.

“Where are you going?” Mike asks, standing in the doorway to El’s room. He’d been on his way back to the living room from the bathroom when he’d seen her through her open door putting on a little bit of eyeshadow, more than she’d usually be wearing at home in the middle of the afternoon.

She jolts slightly, Mike clearly taking her off guard, and she spins, almost dropping the brush. “You scared me,” is all she says in response, turning back to her mirror.

“Sorry,” he says sheepishly “So, where *are* you going?” She takes just a *little* bit too long to reply “Bowling” she says quickly.

“You’re going *bowling* ? With *who*?”

“A friend.” Her response, blunt.

“A *friend* .” Mike throws back “Does this friend have a name?”

A pause.

“...No?”

“Their name is no?” he raises an eyebrow “Or no they don’t have a name?”

“...Yes.”

And then it *clicks*.

“I thought we weren’t going?”

“No. Will said *you two* weren’t going. I’m going.”

“So, a *date*—”

El puts the brush down on the side, before turning back towards Mike  
“It’s *not* a date, it *can’t* be a date so *please* stop saying that. I *just* want to hang out with him. I want something that’s *mine*. ”

Mike falters for a moment, not really sure on what to say or do. He studies her face - so completely sincere - and watches as she deflates, almost as if she’d been waiting so long to let out how she was truly feeling.

And Mike supposes that she really had.

From that first phone call back in May when she’d been concerned about Will being mad at her for being friends with Nick, to their conversations that followed, where he’d been peppered in more and more but never really delving deeper than that. Mike thinks that maybe he’s missed the fullscope of how she truly feels.

Sighing, Mike says “You really want to be friends with *him* ? *Really?* ”

El smiles “We do have a lot in common. Like pineapple on pizza (“*Gross, El*”) and he likes my music. But he also understands how I felt at Christmas and he makes me *happy*. Really happy ”

Mike pauses, holding back his next thought. Instead, he takes a few steps forward, asking El to move a little out of the way. He picks up her makeup brush, taking a quick glance at El, then down at the colour palette, swirling the brush in the pink shade before looking back to her once again and saying -

“I think this will really suit you.”



“You think so?”

“Yeah,” He brings the brush closer to her face and her eyes flicker to a close “You know, for your ‘ *not a date*’” he brushes lightly over the eyelids and El bites at her lip, trying not to smile. “But El, I just want you to know, *whatever* it is, if you’re happy, I’m happy. I mean that.”

This time, she smiles for real.

“Thank you. I feel the same; if you’re happy, I’m happy” El bites her lips again, now more thoughtful, “How should I tell Will? Do you think he’ll understand”

There’s a small knock on the door immediately followed by an “*I will - I do* ” which grabs Mike and El’s attention.

“Will?” Mike questions, placing the makeup brush back down.

“El disappeared and then you were taking *forever*, but I heard you talking and, yeah. I understand.” Will admits, stepping into the room. He turns his attention towards El specifically and sighs, “You look really pretty. Mike was right, it does suit you.”

“Thank you?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Can we come?” Will asks in response to her confusion.

El sighs “Will-”

“I’m not saying that to be a jerk” Will reassures “If he makes you happy, then I *want* to be there for that. But mostly, if Mike is up for it too, I just *really* want to hang out with my friends. I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to realise that.”

El gives him a small smile “I know it must be weird, though.”

Will shrugs “Sure, it’s a little weird, but we’re *all* thinking it’s weird right?” He grins at her “It’ll work out ok, I know we can get through

anything. I also know that with any of those things, I want you by my side. You're my *sister* and all that matters to me is that you're *happy*."

It's then that El surges forward, wrapping Will in a hug that knocks him back slightly, before he returns it. Mike almost feels like he shouldn't be there - it feels like something just for *them* - and tries to leave the room to let Will and El talk alone. But before he can leave, El catches hold of his wrist. He turns back and El pulls a little more bringing him into their hug.

They hear a car horn sound twice from outside the house and El turns away from the mirror, smiling from ear to ear -

"That's him."

---

The car ride is uneventful, Nick had done a good job at hiding his surprise at Will and Mike changing their mind and had greeted them with a large grin. El called shotgun before they'd even left the house, leaving them both in the back seat of Nick's Bronco.

"*Nice*." Mike whistles as he climbs in the back from the passengers side, though Will can tell the complement is reluctant.

"You finally got your car then?" Will comments, following him.

"Right? I wasn't sure what to get so I ran through some options with El and I think we made a good choice," Nick grins in the rear view mirror as El climbs in the front and shuts the door.

"When did you - know what? Never mind."

"We do *call* , Will." El turns to him in the back.

“And that’s *great*” He feels Mike nudge him, followed by a pointed look.

Will sighs, “So, bowling. Hope you’re all ready to lose”

*Benton Bowl* was only a fifteen minute drive away, so it’s not long until they’re pulling into the parking lot. Stepping out of the car, Will wonders for a moment if this was actually a good idea, wondering if maybe feigning *sudden illness* was an option. Staring at the building in front of him, he feels a hand take his own, giving it a comforting squeeze.

“We’re not too far from town” Mike says quietly, smiling at him softly, “If you don’t want to do this, if you just want to get out of here, just say the word.”

For a moment, he almost says yes.

*For El. You’re doing this for El.*

“No,” he gives a small smile back, “I’m ok. Really I *am*. ”

“Ok” Mike sighs “Let’s go get this over with” tone dry.

“Cheer up, Michael. You can’t be that bad at bowling” Nick calls out, not turning back towards the two.

“Are you *sure* you’re good?” Mike groans causing Will to roll his eyes.

“Come on” he says “I’ve been kicking your ass at bowling since we were six and I’m not breaking that streak now”

---

*Benton Bowl* was what Will could only describe as *loud*. They enter to geometric flooring, young children running from their parents and *Alone* playing throughout the room that really could be lowered a notch or two. It's a bit overwhelming Will finds, not helped by one of the children nearly running straight into him, electricity buzzing around his head. *Maybe this is too much right now*. He tries to ground himself, taking comfort in Mike's presence next to him. They'd dropped their hands when they'd walked through the door, but he shuffles closer to him, shoulders brushing. Mike is humming along to *Alone* under his breath and Will focuses only on that, letting the noise softly settle over him. That electric feeling numbs after a while. Everything is still heightened, the children are still running, but he feels more in control, more him - *not someone that'll blow every single bulb in the bowling alley*.

"Does anyone find it weird how we share shoes with strangers when we bowl? Just me? No one ever talks about it" Mike states once they're beginning to put on their bowling shoes.

Will has known Mike long enough to know that the random question is a distraction; an attempt to engage Nick and El in a discussion long enough that Will can sort out what is going through his mind. He's grateful for it, joining in occasionally with their debate. It continues as they make their way to their lane, and Will finds the overwhelming feeling fades even more, a quiet calm surrounding him instead. El takes charge of writing the scoreboard, and it's while her and Nick are laughing over nicknames they'd given the members of their little group, that Will turns to Mike, giving him a small "*Thank you*"

"Who wants another round of cokes?" Will asks an hour or so later, as he finishes his turn. They were almost done with their second game out of three - Will had won the first, and at this point he, and everyone else, could safely say he was the victor of the second one, too.

He receives a chorus of yeses in reply, and Mike starts to stand from where he'd been sitting.

"I'll help you with them. We should probably get some snacks, too"

"I've got it," Nick offers, interrupting them, "It's your turn, Mike," he adds, gesturing to the lane where the pins had reset.

Will shrugs at Mike, who gives him a small smile in return before heading to the stack of bowling balls. "Shall we go?"

It's not until they're at the counter, that Nick casually notes that he wasn't expecting Will and Mike to come.

"We changed our minds" Will mutters, leaning against the wood, flicking at the corner of the *sticky* menu next to him.

"You mean *you* changed your mind, because there's no way he-" Nick gestures over to where their lane was "-changed his."

As Will reaches for a napkin to wipe the residue off his fingers, Nick continues "So was it the fact that you found out me and El were still going, or do you just really like bowling?"

" *Very funny* ." Will scowls, "I'm not here to crash your date. I'm here because you're my friend, El's my sister and you make each other happy," he pauses, sighing, "and I realised I was being a jerk about everything." He adds in a mumble.

" *Oh?* What was that?" Nick grins.

Will nudges him, "Shut up."

The server finally arrives with a smile and a "Same as last time?"

On their nod - and a "Fries and Nachos too" - he busies himself with their order.

"I am sorry, though" Will says "I feel like that's all I've done these last couple of weeks, but I mean it. It's been a really hard time for me - for a while if I think about it - and I was taking that out on the

people I love. It's not an excuse-" he shrugs "-but it is a reason and I am trying to get better, trying to *be* better"

"Is everything alright?" Nick asks, his voice laced with concern.

Will pulls a face, "I'm getting there. I'm glad we joined you, even if I have to deal with this carpet hurting my eyes."

"And is everything ok with-"

There's a noise from their lane, Will and Nick shooting round to face it. El staring at the pins - *a split* - Mike desperately trying to get El's attention as the pins continue to wobble *just* a little too long to seem natural. Will shakes his head in fond exasperation.

"What are they doing?" Nick laughs.

"Oh-they're just-"

Nick's eyes widen a little in what seems like *understanding*. Will feels his own eyes narrow.

"Would you believe me if I said we can't talk about it?"

Nick nods, smiling "As I told you before, you're pretty *special*, Will Byers. I guess I've started to notice that you *both are*."

"But you do know that you can't say *anything* about-"

Nick leans against the counter and shrugs his shoulders with an "I don't know what you're talking about."

*You always were pretty special, too*, Will thinks as he realises just how lucky he is that he still gets to have Nick in his life. He's glad he gets to have *this*. He gets to have his *friend*. And he's really glad El gets him, too.

"Thank you" and in response Nick waves a dismissive hand.

“So. How is everything going with him?” Nick circles back to his unfinished question, gesturing toward where Mike was now taking his own turn.

Will smiles.

“I know he’s never going to be your favourite, but Mike’s been *amazing* . About everything.”

“I’m glad to hear it” and the smile he gives Will is nothing but sincere “He’s good for you.”

“I think so, too,” he smiles back “I *also* think that you’re good for El. I meant it when I said you make each other happy”

Nick looks down, face sheepish “It’s not like that. I mean- El is cool and she does make me happy but-”

“Nick” Will interrupts, smile reassuring now “It’s *ok* . Just do me a favour? Whatever it is - don’t hurt her”

They’re interrupted by their server, bringing over the food and drink and with a quick ‘ *thank you* ’ they take their food and make their way back to the lane.

When they arrive back it’s to El and Mike having taken their final bowls, and Will being declared winner again. He gives them both a smug grin as he and Nick place their food and drinks on the little table provided.

“Are you sure you guys want another round? It’s ok if you want to admit defeat and don’t want to lose three times in a row”

El gives him a smile that feels oddly unsettling but says nothing but “We’re sure. I have a good feeling about this game”

In hindsight, Will should’ve realised exactly what that *good feeling* was the second she mentioned it. In reality, he only realises when his

ball ends up in the gutters for the third time this game and El bowls a strike for the second time in a row. He gives her a glare as she subtly wipes at her nose as she turns back toward them.

“Well done El!” Nick cheers, pulling her into a hug. Will tenses for a moment - *that’s going to take some getting used to* - before he sees the pure joy on her face and he finds himself smiling too.

---

**Saturday 18th July 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

“Can’t believe this is our last in-person *gossip time* ”

“You make it sound like we’re never going to talk again”

“I don’t mean it like that. It’s just - well it’s weird. Despite *everything*, these three weeks have gone so fast. Not sure I’m ready to go back to Hawkins.”

It’s close to seven in the evening on Mike’s final day in Benton and he and El are squeezing in one last talk before he leaves. Whilst he’d spent a lot of his time here with Will - *the main purpose of the trip* , he thinks - he had sort’ve gotten used to El being there every morning when he woke up and it was going to be hard to adjust back to life without both of them in such close proximity.

“It is going to be weird,” El mumbles, “you not being here.”

“Why? You don’t need me anymore, haven’t you got *Niück?*” Mike teases before being promptly kicked in the head.

“I thought you hated him” El aims once again.



“*That*,” Mike dodges this time, before sitting up and pushing her legs off of the side of the bed, “was back when he spent *a lot* of time making out with my boyfriend.” El smirks and Mike rolls his eyes, “That doesn’t mean I like the guy now though ok? (*“Sure, Mike”*) But, if he makes you happy, I’m happy. For the most part.”

She looks down, but Mike can’t help but take note of the small smile on her face. “It’s not like *that* . But I am happy.”

“I’m happy for you too”

They hold that for a moment before Mike tilts his head a couple of times, indicating for her to move over, changing his position on the bed and laying his head next to hers.

“So, what do you want to talk about?”

She hums before “You and Will.”

“El-” he sighs.

“It’s ok,” she nudges him, “I want to. I’ve been thinking, Chicago was different. You two were different. You were-” she pauses, as if trying to find the right word, “- *more*.”

*More.*

“You noticed, huh?” Mike sheepishly replies.

“Mike. *Everyone* noticed. You ordered from the kids menu”

“Maybe I just really wanted chicken fingers-”

“ *Mike*.”

They both laugh then. He’s not even sure he knows *what* they’re laughing at specifically, what El had said wasn’t that funny, but once

they started, they couldn't stop. Coming down a little, El shifts closer and rests her head, the best she can, against Mike's shoulder.

"Is that ok?" Mike asks, once they've sobered up, ribs aching a little "That me and Will are - *more*?" He falters a little at the words. It feels strange to say that outloud; is that what they were? More? He's very aware they haven't really spoken about this, *how would you even start that conversation.*

*Don't hide under the covers for starters.*

But then, Mike considers, does *more* really explain what they are? The thoughts, the feelings, that *joy* and how *beautiful* everything felt, he wouldn't take that away - but adding an extra layer on top of what was already a cacophony of emotions, it's *intimidating* .

He won't correct El, but Mike wonders that maybe he's further away from *more* - whatever *that* means - than he thought.

She nods against him, bringing him back to the room, back to his conversation with El, "It's weird though, about us. That we're done now. For real-" Mike tenses and she's quick to reassure, "I mean - it's more that -" she stalls, thinking over her words "Look, I never want to be with you again."

"Thanks El." He rolls his eyes

"But for a long time I never imagined that would be the case." She pauses again "I'm going to tell you something, ok?"

"Ok?"

She stares at him. "And don't laugh."

"El, just *tell* me, already"

She exhales, shifting her position so that her now clasped together hands were resting against Mike's shoulder. She settles back down, nestling in closer so that her cheek is resting on her hands -

"I used to think we were *forever*."

They share a look before she continues "Sometimes, I'd watch Rom Coms and look in magazines and I'd cut things out and I'd plan and imagine our wedding. I used to talk to Will about it sometimes, just after we moved, and he never said too much - which makes a lot of sense now-" Mike snorts, "But, he'd let me talk and sometimes he'd tell me that you love me anyway so it wouldn't matter really. I *know* we were kids but I had a notebook and everything." El sighs, "It's stupid-"

"No, no it's not. I did the same - well, I didn't have a notebook but Lucas used to rib me for it all the time. I'd imagine it a lot; things like where we'd live, what pet we'd have - a *dog* obviously - how many kids we'd have-" Mike feels El shudder slightly, turning his head towards her, he says - "What? No kids?"

"No kids."

"With me or with anyone?"

"*Obviously* not with *you*. But no. No kids."

"I didn't know that."

"We never really spoke about it. Any of it. I just knew that I wanted you around forever, but now I know it's because you're my best friend. I didn't realise that was something I could have" she pauses "And now, I still get you as my family. *Especially* with you and Will"

Mike feels his face flush at the words.

*Especially with you and Will. Does she realise what she's saying there?*

"El, you've been my family since that day I found you in the woods."

And she has. From the moment he'd shone that flashlight at her, Mike had known he'd needed her around; as a friend, then a girlfriend, and now as *family*. The meaning of El and *Family* has changed over the years and though, for both of them he supposes, it wasn't what either of them had expected - even maybe hoped for at one point - but that didn't make her being family any less true. He'd truly meant it at Christmas when he'd said that El would be his soulmate, still in that completely platonic way, and Mike thinks that he wouldn't change that for *anything*.

"So, do you still have the notebook?" He grins

"No." El deadpans, but she grins, too.

A comfortable silence settles over them, the only sound being their breathing.

"Hey El?" She hums in response, "When did you *not* think it anymore?"

"It was before we broke up. Maybe when-"

"When we were at the movies during Spring Break? Dustin and that stupid movie, what was it-"

"*Pretty In Pink*" El finishes for him.

"*Why* did you think that, exactly?"

"You were acting weird."

"That narrows it down"

“Dustin would say things about the movie and you’d be strange. Will was being weird and it seemed like that was all you were thinking about.”

“I think back to that day a lot now. I wonder if maybe I didn’t want to acknowledge a lot of things -”

“And look how much you *love* him now.”

“Shut up.”

“ *Kids* menu, Mike. Kids. Menu”

---

*GAME OVER* flashes on the TV once again. Will groans, throwing the controller next to him and rubbing over his eyes. He’d been playing *Asteroids* ever since Mike had left to go to talk with El (“ *We have to have our gossip time*”) but despite playing for almost an hour now, he hadn’t been able to focus very well. Laying back onto his bed, he’s disturbed by the music of the game starting up again. He scrambles for the controller, pressing at buttons to pause the game - not bothering to sit up, not in the mood to see another game over screen - but at the now familiar sound of his spaceship being destroyed plays through his TV, he unceremoniously pushes the controller onto the floor, groaning into his hands once again.

“It’s only a game, Will” he hears from the doorway. Sitting up so quickly that he gives himself head rush, he spots Mike, grinning at him.

“Like to see you do better” he retorts

“I literally have the high score on *your* Atari” Mike grins wider, walking over to join Will on the bed. He sits, moving the pillows back against the headboard and making himself comfortable. “Sometimes, you’ve just got to admit defeat, Will the Wise.”

Rolling his eyes, Will scoots up to join him. “Pretty sure that’s not the

attitude our Dungeon Master should be having.”

“Pretty sure *you* should just accept you’re not good at *Asteroids*.”

“Well I wouldn’t have *had* to play it if someone didn’t leave me to gossip with my sister.” Will nudges him, “How is she anyway? I wouldn’t know, I’m not allowed *in*.” he continues, jesting.

“Will-”

“Yeah, I know. *What’s said in the room stays in the room.*” he begins to move to pick up the controller again. Before he can reach it, he feels arms wrap around his shoulders, stopping him from making it much further than where he was originally situated.

“Well, if you don’t want to hear about all the nice things I said about you then fine.” Mike murmurs, resting his chin against Will’s left shoulder. “And, I did say some real nice things.”

“And I know the first night you got here, you did this *exact* same thing so I’m not falling for that again”

*He does.*

“But what were those *things* exactly?”

Mike softly laugh, wrapping his arms a little tighter, “Mainly about how *you* helped El plan mine and her wedding and-”

Will frowns, “She told you about that? Is everything ok - is *she* ok?”

Mike, with a sigh, pulls his arms away, the two of them now sitting side by side. He rests an elbow on his knee, resting his palm against his cheek. “She’s good. *We’re* good. You know what I said to you about her moving on, feeling weird for me?” Will nods, “Today we had *closure*.”

“Closure involving you discussing your wedding?” Will raises an

eyebrow.

“Yeah. I know it sounds crazy but I think it was good for us. Strange, but good.”

“Are you ok?”

Mike hums in response, “Yeah, I really am.” he pauses, “Thanks - for doing that for her. For *us*, I guess.”

*I didn't really do much.*

*Well -*

Will shrugs, hugging himself muttering, “It’s what anyone would do. I was just being a good brother”

“No but-” Mike stops himself. Will watches as he has a pensive look on his face, almost as if trying to find the right words to say. He lets out a breath before finally saying “I just mean, it can’t have been *easy*. ”

“I wasn’t just some *pinning* kid, Mike.”

“I didn’t mean it like *that*. It’s more - I don’t know, it makes sense in my head. I just. I don’t think I could have done it.”

*A pause.*

“Can I tell you something?”

Mike nods.

"I think I just gave up." Mike furrows his brows "Not that I ever thought anything would happen between us anyway but, I saw her face when she was talking about you, and I remembered the way you'd talk about her, I gave up. I had to, *wanted* to because it wasn't fair on any of us. So I moved on - well, I thought I did then last year happened and here we are."

"You could try and seem happier about that fact." Mike nudges him playfully

"You *know* that I am" He nudges back.

"Seriously though, I'm sorry I didn't realise. I was, *otherwise preoccupied*."

*That's one way to describe it*, Will thinks.

"- *But* I'm glad though." Mike continues, voice a little quieter. "That you didn't completely give up."

"Me too. You know, apart from when you *ditch me* to gossip with my sister."

Mike pushes him and Will pushes back. Mike catches his hand as he does, interlocking their fingers.

"You should be grateful for El. Now I'm all fresh with ideas for *our* wedding."

"*Shut up*"

"Though, saying that, with the advice you were giving her, I guess you're an expert on that already"

He's *definitely* teasing, all of this is *definitely* just to get a rise out of him, but Will feels his face burn.

"I *will* kick you out."



“Aw, come on Will, don’t you want to talk about color schemes?”  
Mike grins

“No. Because I am *not* planning an imaginary wedding like I’m *eight years old*.”

“I was *thirteen*—”

“Because that’s *you*. You’re dramatic. There’s a reason you were always the DM - and *apparently* there was always a reason our campaigns usually ended with one of the *brave warriors asking for the princess’s hand*.”

A pause.

“You want a dog though, right?”

Will rolls his eyes “Of course we’re getting a dog—”

He stills momentarily, catching himself.

Mike looks on wide-eyed before his lips curl into a smirk, “ *Well*—”

“Ok , I’m done. Back to *Asteroids*.”

Dropping their hands, he scurries forward, picking the controller back up once again, making an attempt to ignore Mike’s laughing (“*Don’t be like that Will*”) , and pressing the start button, the game beginning from *zero points* once again. Mike scoots up behind him, still laughing, and wraps his arms around Will’s waist, leaning down to place a soft kiss on his shoulder, before he once again rests his head gently upon it.

---

**Sunday 19th July 1987. Benton, Illinois.**

The clock shows seven thirty when Mike is finally settled once again, the next morning. It's early, the house is still asleep - neither Jonathan or Will's parents having work today - and Mike doesn't know why he isn't either. The Greyhound back to Hawkins isn't supposed to leave until two, Joyce dropping him off at the station around one thirty *"just to make sure Karen can't get mad at me for getting you home late."*

It was six when he woke up; *sitting up in the camp bed, walking out to the kitchen, having a drink, moving back to the room, getting dressed, going back to the kitchen.* He'd gotten so much done so early, and now with his duffle bag packed and ready, he found himself sitting on top of his bed, wringing his hands together. He doesn't want to go, the three weeks over before he knew it.

*So much has happened.*

It's not that he's not excited to see his family again - and he does feel a little guilty about not keeping his mom in the loop - but something about the Byers house has always felt like home. *Maybe it's all the history,* Mike isn't sure; all he knows, as he realises that his fingers are now absentmindedly fiddling with the pin on his collar, is that *here* is where he felt most himself.

His fingers slip to the back of the pin, pressing at the clasp, letting it go, and pressing it again.

*Just do it. Get it over and done with.*

He presses once more. Pulls against it slightly. Then he stops.

“What’s wrong with me?” He mutters.

There’s a rustling from Will’s bed, grabbing Mike’s attention. Will turns over, nestling a little more into the covers, pulling them up so they cover half his face. It’s only his eyes that can be seen, though he’s clearly screwing his face - his eyebrows furrowed.

“Mike?” Will says, voice groggy, eyes still firmly shut,

“Sorry, did I wake you up?”

“No,” *So yes then* . “It’s *early*, ” Will mumbles, reaching out to nothing.

“ *Yeah*, it is”

Will makes a grabbing motion with his still outstretched hand. “Come here?”

Rolling his eyes, Mike makes his way over to the bed, “You summoned me?”

“ *Get. In.* ”

“As you wish, Will the Wise - but do you think maybe you should move over first? I don’t exactly have any room.”

Will gives him a sleepy grin in response before shifting over slightly in the bed, making room for Mike, who climbs in and immediately finds Will’s arm thrown across him.

“Wait -” Will pads at the material, eyes still closed, “Are you dressed? Like dressed, dressed? Why?”

“I was awake and needed something to do with my time that wasn’t just make *another* pot of coffee”

“Then what are you doing in here?”

“You *asked* me.” Mike smiles, taking hold of the edge of the

comforter covering Will's face and tugging a little, "Now, are you planning on pulling this down and opening your eyes at any point?"

Will makes a noise in recognition before simply saying "Two secs."

It's longer than two seconds and, as Mike hears Will's breathing begin to slow, he knows he's almost fallen asleep once again. It's only a small gesture as Will taps the side of his arm to indicate that he's still awake, but it fills Mike with warmth. He doesn't hesitate to place his own arm on top of Will's, making small brush stroke like movements along Will's with the pad of his thumb. It's in no particular rhythm or pattern - they're *slow, soft, delicate* in nature - and Mike does it more for something to do, though as Will nestles a little closer, his hold a little tighter, he's overcome with the feeling that this was *right*.

*I've missed thi-*

"I don't want you to leave."

Will's voice is so soft, Mike almost doesn't hear him.

"Just move in here. You're practically part of the family anyway - mom loves you, I *guess* El can still have her weekly chats. It works in everyone's favour."

Mike chuckles, "I should probably see my family at some point - Holly will be missing her brother, and she always *did* prefer me to Nancy."

"Bring her too."

"Yeah, that'll be easy to explain to my parents; *sorry mom, me and Holly now live with my best friend turned boyfriend Will Byers and the family in Illinois. Oh, and remember Police Chief Hopper?-*"

"*Hilarious*" Will snorts "But seriously, I don't-" a pause, and then in a quieter voice "I don't know when I'll see you next."

“You’ll see me, if you *open your eyes* ”

“You know what I *mean* .”

“I know” he says softly “I’ve been trying not to think about leaving, if I’m honest. Being here with you - *all of you* - has been the best summer I’ve had in a long time.”

“Based on previous years that’s not *exactly* saying much.” Will yawns, shifting slightly now. He blinks before his eyes flutter open, Mike mumbling a *ta-da* and Will rolls his eyes and smiles. “We don’t exactly have a good track record for summers.”

“You know what *I* mean.”

Will nudges him.

“So, what were you doing before I woke up?” Will changes position, now slightly more upright

“Well, I told you, I needed something to do-”

Mike doesn’t realise that he’d been absentmindedly playing with the badge, once again, until he feels a hand cup over his own. He glances down, before meeting Will’s gaze once again. Mike isn’t sure what expression he expected; *pity, disappointment?* Instead he’s met with something he can only describe as *bittersweet* . Will knows. Of course he knows, he always has, but although he *gets it* in a way Mike presumes most people couldn’t, it doesn’t change the fact that this *one* simple action he needs to do, *hurts*.

“I can’t do it.”

Mike thinks he hasn’t heard his own voice this *small* in a long time.

“I know I have to, but I *can’t do it*”

Will peels Mike’s fingers away from the badge, lightly smoothing his

thumb over it once Mike's hands were clear. It's soft, specific movements, wordless but almost as if he were trying to say '*it's ok*'. Gently, Will presses his own two fingers against his lips before touching the badge once more. And then it happens - something that had seemed so hard for Mike seems easy for Will as he *pops* the back of the badge off and takes both pieces in his hand. He holds it for a moment, hiding it out of view before picking up Mike's hand and, before he realises, the badge is in his hand.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry."

"I didn't want to do it."

"I know."

It feels *different* once Will hands the badge back. Despite the fact that Mike had had two of them in his room, in his *house* for weeks after Robin had given him them, looking at it now felt so much more significant. They'd both worn these badges as they walked hand in hand down the streets of Chicago, a place where people like them were celebrated. Will had loved the gift and it made Mike's stomach swoop every time he saw it on his lapel. He'd gotten used to seeing his *own* on *himself* whenever he looked in the mirror, so, holding it now, having to hide it after they'd gotten to be so completely them, feels *weird* .

It deserves to be on display, not in the bottom of the front pocket of his backpack.

The thought makes him sad, and he slowly moves the badge between his fingers as he thinks. These last three weeks - argument aside - had been exactly what Mike had needed and he'd gotten used to living in

such close proximity to Will. It felt so right, so *natural* , that the fact it was coming to an end now left an uncomfortable knot in his stomach. A lot had happened these last few weeks, and Mike felt as though it had impacted him in ways - *good* ways - that he hadn't fully realised himself yet.

Impacted them *both* in ways that they hadn't *spoken* about yet.

*I don't want to leave without clearing things up. I shouldn't go without clearing things up.*

It's scary, and what he said to El the day prior is still in his mind, but acknowledging it, not even a little bit before he goes, somehow feels worse. He doesn't need to know what *more* means for them, not exactly, not yet, but regardless, he thinks maybe he should say *something*.

*Because you know you'll regret it if you don't.*

"I meant it by the way." Will makes a questioning sound in acknowledgment. "You know, the distracting thing?" - *no going back now.*

"I don't know about you, but I've been thinking about it, *everything*, a lot and-"

"I have too." Will mumbles.

"You have? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't know." Will trails away, "Why didn't *you*?"

"Where do you even start with a conversation like that? ' *Hi Will. Want to talk about what happened on our trip to the city? You know, the one where-*'"

"You hid under the covers for the rest of the night?"

Mike scoffs “It wasn’t the *rest* of the night, I just-”

“Waited until I was definitely asleep until you *reappeared*.”

And then grins at the tone in Will’s voice.

*This feels like us.*

“Well, what would you do if *my* mom had said goodnight to you in the way she did to me?”

“Not hide under the covers?”

“That’s *bullshit*. You *would* have.”

They laugh then. It’s a ridiculous conversation really - talking about *everything* and *nothing* at the same time. Mike wonders for a moment why he was so worried about bringing it up, especially hearing that Will has been thinking about *everything* and *nothing* too. Will imitates *what not to do*, Mike tells him to *stop mocking him* and before long they’re in a comfortable silence, led back side by side, staring at the glow in the dark stars on Will’s ceiling.

“You know what I blame?”

Will laughs, “What?”

“ *Chicago* . I blame *Chicago* ”

“You blame the city? I don’t think you can blame a whole city”

“Fine. I blame Tony Hadley then”

“Who?”



“You know, Tony Hadley? Spandau Ballet? *That* ridiculous song in the hotel room *True* and the *ha, ha ha-*”

“*Stop,*” but Will’s smiling. “Ok. Let’s blame Chicago and Tony Hadley.”

“It was a nice trip though. The bookshop was really cool” Mike says, absentminded looking over to his now very full duffle bag, the top of *Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy* just poking out between his clothes.

“Yeah, it was - *oh*, did you take the polaroids you wanted to keep?”

“Already inside my book - and the other one we took, on the street?”

Will grins, “Already on my shelf”

“I think that’s my favourite one” Mike admits “I wish I could-”

“I know.” Will gives him a small smile “One day you’ll be able to have things like that on display, though. One day you won’t have to take that badge off.”

*But right now, one day doesn’t feel like a possibility.*

He smiles, knowing it doesn’t quite meet his eyes - knowing that Will has noticed this too. He hopes it’ll be a thing, of course he does, and really, Mike wants nothing more than to go home, place the badge in his Mom’s hands and tell her *‘this is how I spent my three weeks. Not on a family trip to Chicago with the Byers, but three weeks with my Boyfriend who I’m in love with.’* But memories of that day in April come back to him - an overheard phone call, a feeling of dejection. *One day*, may be *some day*, but who knows when that will be?

*Let’s not think of that.* He makes an attempt to shake the thoughts and flips back to the previous conversation.

"I *am* sorry we didn't talk about it. The hotel. We should have spoken about it" He takes a breath, steadies himself, *Ok. Just say it.* "Maybe not now, since I'm leaving in a couple of hours, but sometime we *could* talk about it? If you wanted to?"

He doesn't know whether it's seconds, minutes, *hours*, but once it's said, once it's out there, time just seems to slow. There's no way to take it back, Mike knows this, and yet he finds himself scrambling through options of what he can say to correct the situation; *That's not how I meant it. I meant 'talk about it' more in a figurative sense. I was kidding - no. Definitely not that one.*

"We can talk about it." Will finally says a little while later "We probably should at some point"

"Yeah?"

Will nods "Yeah. I mean if it's a thing - I mean, if it's something we're thinking about - we should talk about what that means. And how we feel," he pauses for a moment "I mean, *I'm* thinking about it - wait no, not right now, not all the *time* , but I *am* , and I don't know if *you are*, you don't *have* to be. To be honest, I don't know, don't *think* I'm even *ready* - "

"Will?" Mike interrupts with a small laugh

"What's so funny?"

"You've just said everything that's been in my head the last few days"

"Oh" Will's frown slips away "Really?"

Mike nods "Really"

"So we can talk about it? Soon? When - or *if* , because we might never be and that's ok, too - we're both ready"

"That was a very *Joyce Byers* thing to say"

"Well, I may have gotten a *bit* of advice-"

Mike laughs again and Will follows suit.

With one last nudge, Mike pushes himself off the bed and walks back over to his duffle bag - pushing *Hitchhikers* in a little deeper so it's now completely closed. Will sits up now, taking the covers off of himself and into a bundle at the bottom of the bed. He crosses his legs, and leans on to his elbows, watching - Mike shoots him a smile as he slings the duffle bag over his shoulder.

“Ok, Will the Wise. When we're both ready, we can talk about it.”

---

Mike gets home around eight in the evening on Sunday and enters the living room to be met with a very enthusiastic Holly, who had jumped on him the second he entered wrapping her arms around his neck with an ‘*I missed you*’, a very smug looking Nancy, and his mom kissing the top of his head with another ‘*I missed you*’. Even his dad had spared a moment to look up from the paper and ask him how his trip was.

“It was good. Busy. A *lot* happened. *But*, I got you all a souvenir” he says, sliding his backpack from his shoulders and opening the zipper. He takes out a mug, passing it to his dad, who gives a quick appreciative nod.

“How's Will?” Nancy asks, eyebrow raised “Jonathan told me you guys were up early most days to make the most of it”

“Jonathan should learn he doesn't have to tell you everything” Mike retorts as he pulls out the snowglobe he'd bought for Holly. She gasps excitedly as he stretches his arm out toward her and takes it from him hugging it to her chest before shaking it, eyes sparkling as she watches the snow fall.

“I think it's really great that you're talking again,” His mom says as he reaches back into his bag and hands her a novelty ‘Map of

Chicago' dish towel.

"So does Mike," Nancy smirks and Mike flips her off, though this is thankfully missed by their parents; his mom admiring her gift and their dad having turned back to the newspaper. "It seems they're *really* catching up for lost time"

"There was no time to catch up on because it was *never* lost"

"Of course not, you made sure you were up early to make the most of it"

And with that, Mike begrudgingly throws her the key chain he'd bought her, smirking slightly when she has to move from her spot on the couch to pick it up, before he drops into the armchair.

"We never did stop talking Mom, not really" He gets back to the main point of the conversation "It was just *different* with Jane and everything"

"And now it's *not* different?" she asks, raising her eyebrow

"Well, no, because - *for the hundredth time* - me and Jane *aren't* together anymore. Besides, I realised ditching your friends just because you're dating someone is a pretty shitty thing to do"

"*Language*"

Mike gives an exasperated shake of his head.

"I'm just saying that three weeks is a *long* time to be around a girl so, if you were or if you had any questions, if *anything* is going on at all, you can *talk to me*"

"Ok. Me and Jane *aren't* together, really we're not. We're much better as friends and I'm not looking at any girls right now, so you don't need to answer any *questions* or whatever"

"I'm just saying-" his mom defends, holding her hands up in front of her

"But you don't need to" he reassures "Really you don't. Most of the

time I spent with Jane on this trip was spent talking about how she is *talking to someone else* . Kind of. Sort of-”

“Who is it?” Nancy asks, eyebrow raised. He glances at his mom and knows he can’t mention any names in front of her because they will lead to too many questions that it’s not his place to answer.

“I’ll tell you later” he promises, earning a small protest from his mom but she eventually allows Mike this one secret and moves on to ask him specifics about the trip.

He internally sighs with relief.

“Well-” he starts “On the second day we went to this *really* cool bookstore-”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading! Follow us both on tumblr  
[@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)

### **Author's Note:**

Thanks for reading! Follow us both on tumblr  
[@mayfixlds](#) [@okwillthewise](#)